Rivers of the World: Asia

Focus Question: What is the Tibetan Plateau and which Asian rivers originate from there?

PREPARE & READ

- Explain that these pages are from a guidebook on rivers of the world.
- Note that the first page provides an overview of Asian rivers, while the second page concentrates on two of these rivers.
- Ask students to read the card.

READ CLOSELY

Vocabulary

On the first page, look at the three nicknames for the Tibetan Plateau (in bold text). How do these names help you visualise the importance of the plateau? Why are these nicknames featured with inverted commas around them?

Author’s Purpose/Intention

The author has used different maps on the front and back of the card. Why do you think they did this? Why does the second map show more detail?

Illustrations and Text

The card includes photos of a farmer tilling the rich soil near the banks of the river and a fisherman from the Ganges River. How do these illustrations indicate the essential role the river plays for the people living there? There is one very important use of the river which is not illustrated. What is it?

Draw Conclusions

The author highlights several issues that currently threaten the Ganges, and identifies one way that India is trying to protect the Ganges. Why does the author label this as “an important first step” in saving the river system?
Often called the ‘Roof of the World’, the Tibetan Plateau is the largest, highest plateau on Earth. It is surrounded by the world’s tallest mountains, including the mighty Everest. The plateau has also been called the ‘Water Tower of Asia’, but that’s not because of its rainfall. Annual precipitation is so low – 100 to 300 mm a year – that some areas are classified as desert. Much of the rain falls as hail in this cold, rocky land.

The mountain ranges that ring the plateau are the Himalayas, Kunlun, Qilian and Kunlun mountain ranges. These are home to towering, snow-covered peaks and tens of thousands of glaciers. It’s the summer melting of these glaciers and snowfields that gives rise to the plateau’s reputation as a water tower. Ten of Asia’s mightiest rivers spring from here.

Yet another nickname for the plateau is the ‘Third Pole’. It holds the largest reserves of water outside the north and south poles. This water is stored up in glacial ice and snow. As the glaciers melt, they feed the rivers. They bring life-giving water to the 1.3 billion people living in the river basins. But here’s the problem. Earth’s climate is changing. The ice in the Third Pole is melting at a faster pace than anywhere else in the world. So what happens when the glaciers are gone? What will happen to Asia’s life-giving rivers?

Many of them live along the rivers. The rivers provide protein-rich fish for eating. They bring water to nourish the food crops. The silt they carry makes the farmlands more fertile. Trade and travel happen on the water. The rivers form a rich part of the social and spiritual lives of the people living around them.

The Ganges River begins in western Himalayas. Along with its tributaries, it spreads across a quarter of India. It brings water to hundreds of millions of people. Farmers have irrigated their crops with Ganges water for thousands of years. The dams sustain them in the dry seasons and droughts.

The Brahmaputra River originates on the northern slopes of the Himalayas in Tibet, where it is called the Yarlung Tsangpo. It emerges from the mountains to enter the north-eastern region of India, from there it flows south through Bangladesh. It meets the Ganges to form a large, fertile delta that drains into the bay of Bengal. But the Ganges-Brahmaputra river system is in crisis. Cities discharge rubbish and sewage into these sacred rivers. Intensive farming and industry have added to the pollution. Droughts have caused excess silt to flow into the rivers. This increases the risk of severe flooding during the annual monsoonal rains. Yet in the dry season parts of the rivers dry up.

Another serious issue facing this river system is rising sea levels. Over time, sea water could threaten to flood this significant resource. To protect the Ganges-Brahmaputra for future generations to use and enjoy, action needs to be taken now. In 2014 the Government of India announced an integrated Ganges development project called Namami Ganga. This project champions changes that will help clean up the water. This is an important first step in the complicated process of saving the river system.

DISCUSS

These questions can be used for paired discussion. Ask students to use the text to support their conclusions with the group.

• The author uses rhetorical questions at the bottom of page one. Why are these effective tools to engage a reader?

• The card mentions that the Brahmaputra River runs through Tibet, India and Bangladesh. How does this fact make it difficult to implement conservation measures?

• What surprised you most about the Tibetan Plateau? How could you find out more about these critical river systems?

WRITE

Have students choose either one of the following options for writing, or do both.

- Make a table that lists the important human uses for the Brahmaputra and Ganges Rivers in one column, and the challenges currently facing these rivers in another column. Tick those challenges that may be able to be influenced by human intervention in a positive way. (Information/Explanation)

- Why is the care and maintenance of the Brahmaputra and Ganges Rivers important globally and not just for people living in Tibet, India or Bangladesh? Use facts from the card to support your answer. (Opinion)

Extension Question: The second page deals with the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers together. Why did the author do this?