As Narmada dam fills, villages go under

Madhya Pradesh protests against Gujarat violating schedule ahead of rehabilitation

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Ahead of Raksha Bandhan, as a rising Narmada began submerging Nasirpur, Ismail Islamuddin had only eight days to rescue his family. He grabbed whatever he could – clothes, buckets and medicines – and lugged a refrigerator and a TV on a hired tractor to the other end of the town. When just a day remained, he gathered courage and rowed a boat back to salvage his Aadhaar card; but it was too late by then.

A month later, Mr. Islamuddin, who used to weld agricultural implements, points to a mass of barely visible jagged rooftops, his submerged house among them.

“That’s where the bus stop was. And there, right under that peepal tree, we had our evening tea,” he reminisces.

If the plan to fill the Sardar Sarovar dam to its brim by mid-October without rehabilitating the affected was not harrowing enough for Madhya Pradesh, it is being done by Gujarat at a menacing pace – a month ahead of the schedule. This has spelt mayhem in villages along the banks upstream. By Wednesday, water in the dam had already risen to 135.6 metres, although 135 metres was to be achieved only by the end of September, to reach its full level of 138.68 metres by October 15.

To escape the rising waters spilling onto the streets and breaking into houses of Nasirpur in Dhar district, the largest town facing submersion, Mr. Islamuddin has rented a house, but others have not been so lucky; 270 families lay cooped up in 10-by-10 feet tin shelters at a relief camp. In the district, 26 such camps for 3,000 families, awaiting rehabilitation, have been set up by the Narmada Valley Development Authority (NVDA).

The Madhya Pradesh government has written to the Centre flagging the filling up of the reservoir ahead of schedule, even as rehabilitation of project-affected families remains to be completed upstream.

In the letter dated September 3, M. Gopal Reddy, vice-chairman of the NVDA, informed U.P. Singh, Secretary of the Union Ministry of Jal Shakti, that while by the end of September the reservoir was supposed to be filled up to 135 metres, it was already touching 135.12 metres. “It is clear that the action is violative of the schedule provided by the Narmada Control Authority vide the order dated May 10, 2019,” wrote Mr. Reddy.

Gujarat has stated that as the dam had both horizontal and vertical construction joints, it was important to test its integrity by filling it to the brim.