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Delhi scientist wins top award for aiding Bengal farmers

A Delhi-based scientist, Aditi Mukherji has won arguably the world's most prestigious award for young researchers in food and water management, named after the father of India's Green Revolution Norman Borlaug. The World Food Prize Foundation, started by Borlaug, has picked Mukherji for the first-ever Norman Borlaug Award in Field Research and Application for her work in transforming access to water for thousands of farmers in West Bengal. The award comes with \$10,000 prize, and will be formally presented to Mukherji on October 17 in Des Moines, Iowa, US.

"The research I worked on helped remove barriers in water access for farmers in West Bengal," Mukherji told HT from Stockholm, Sweden, where the award was announced on Tuesday.

Mukherji, 37, is a senior researcher at the Delhi office of the International Water Management Institute (IWMI). As alumnus of Presidency College (Kolkata), JNU (Delhi), she completed her PhD at the University of Cambridge.

The Borlaug Award is restricted to scientists under 40.

Though Bengal receives significantly greater rainfall than Haryana or Punjab, and has a higher water table than northern states, its agricultural productivity has been lower for several years now: an apparent contradiction that intrigued Mukherji.

Mukherji showed that antiquated government rules were spawning corruption and barring farmers from efficiently accessing water. Her research forced the government to remove these barriers.

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WHAT SHE DID FOR FARMERS



- Mukherji surveyed over 4,000 groundwater users and found that a West Bengal policy requiring farmers to obtain permits before using power-driven tube wells was to blame.
- The permit system spawned corruption, forcing farmers to stick with inefficient diesel.
- Her research forced West Bengal government to scrap rule requiring permits.

■ Aditi Mukherji