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Borlaug award

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This week saw another alumnus of the Presidency College, fondly called the Oxford of the East, do India proud by bagging Rockefeller Foundation's first ever Borlaug Field Award, which has been constituted to recognise young researchers helping farmers and hungry people around the world through science. Earlier this month string theorist Ashoke Sen, another Presidency product, wowed the world when he was named one among the eight scientists worldwide to receive the three million dollar Fundamental Physics Prize in its first edition.

Presidency College, now Presidency University, counts among its illustrious alumni the famous scientists Jagadish Chandra Bose, Satyendra Nath Bose, Meghnad Saha and statistician Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis. Something in the air at this grand institution that breeds such wonderful science and scientists?

Coming back to the young social scientist who influenced policy through her work, after Presidency College, Aditi Mukherji studied at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi; and the Indian Institute of Technology, Mumbai; and completed a Ph.D degree in Human Geography at the University of Cambridge, United Kingdom.

Her research on groundwater resources in agriculture has done thousands of farmers in West Bengal a world of good. According to the press release announcing the honour, Mukherji a senior researcher at the **International Water Management Institute's** New Delhi office, has surveyed more than 4,000 groundwater users to discover that smallholder farmers in water-abundant eastern India were unable to get water for their irrigation needs due to policy restrictions that actually were made keeping in mind the water scarcity in other parts of the country. She became the voice of the voiceless working closely with farmers and villagers to record their concerns.

Through research and political engagement, she became instrumental in getting two critical policy changes in two years— one to remove a restrictive permit requirement for operating low-power irrigation pumps; and another to reduce the electrification cost to run the pumps. Following these policy changes, the farmers now have easier and more universal access to groundwater for irrigation and will be able to intensify their cropping systems, earn better livelihoods and emerge out of poverty, the award committee noted. Mukherji presented her research to the government convincing them that the situation in water-rich east India was different from other parts of the country facing scarcity and depletion of groundwater.

Mukherji will get the 10,000 dollar award at the World Food Prize international symposium in the US in October. Here's raising a toast to the Oxford of the East for nurturing some of the best brains this country has produced!