

## INDIAN DELEGATION VISITS FABI



A high level Indian delegation of senior civil servants, forest service officers and the Minister of Agriculture of Orissa State, India, visited the University of Pretoria on Tuesday, 20 June 2006. Orissa is a State about the same size as South Africa of about 35 million people, 70% of whom depend heavily on agriculture for their livelihoods. Some of the districts in the State are amongst the poorest in India and whereas many villagers are engaged in subsistence agriculture, others are still engaged in hunting, gathering and shifting agriculture.

The visitors were Mr Surendra Nath Naik, Minister of Agriculture, Government of Orissa; Dr RN Bohidar (IAS), Agriculture Production Commissioner cum Addl, Chief Secretary, Government of Orissa; Mr HS Chahar (IAS), Secretary, Agriculture, Government of Orissa; Mr A Behera (IAS), Secretary, Water Resources, Government of Orissa; Mr G Bhaskar Reddy (IFS), Director, Orissa Watershed Development Mission; Mr Lingaraj Otta (IFS), Project Director Watershed, Bolangir, Orissa; and Mr Jayesh Bhatia, NR International Country Representative, India. They were accompanied by Jaco Roets of the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA) who hosted and organised their visit.

The delegation arrived at FABI in time for lunch with Prof Brenda Wingfield, other members of the FABI management committee and seven of the PhD students. After lunch there was an interesting discussion in the FABI Board Room on the research being carried out at FABI and that being done in Orissa State. The discussion was led by Prof Wingfield and centred around biotechnology and the development of crop strains tolerant to environmental stresses and resistant to pests and pathogens. The Minister enquired about work undertaken regarding genetically modified (GM) crops specifically the cotton crop. GMO experimental design and production can be a very controversial issue, and the Minister often alluded to his belief in the development of drought resistant crops of a standard that would be agriculturally and economically beneficial. The delegation was keen to learn about transgenic crops, and our response to the propagation of such crops.

Prof Brenda Wingfield and other FABIans then took the visitors on a tour of FABI to show the type of work being done and the facilities available. They were also allowed to tour the transgenic facility, within quarantine restrictions. They were highly impressed with the world class facilities and infrastructure that FABI has in place that enables excellent scientific research to be undertaken. Further collaboration and international visits between the two countries were discussed.

To quote Jaco Roets' e-mail of thanks: "The delegation was very impressed, not only by the technical expertise, but also by the hospitality. Surely that is what makes an institution world-class, not only high academic standards but also the ability to share knowledge with others".