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CONCEPT NOTE

In recent times, food has come to acquire a significance never felt before in the history of humankind. Emerging health problems, challenges for feeding a burgeoning population, impact on environment and climate change and relationship of food and lifestyle, all have emerged as an important issues which calls for examining the link between culture and biology of food. It is long established that food habits are community-specific and the practices are generally carried on for generations. The saying “*we are what we eat*” has never been effectively felt than in our modern society, where there occurs an infinite array of food choices but a dearth of nutritious/appropriate food. Our physical and mental well-being is directly linked to what we consume. Many experts have indicated that food preferences and choices in present time is influenced more by market than by requirements. Although the importance of balanced diet has been realised since long, but never has been the challenge of ensuing balanced diet to the population felt/required as it is now. As far back as 6 A.D. the Greek philosopher, Hippocrates had said that ‘If we could give every individual the right amount of nourishment and exercise, not too little and not too much, we would have found the safest way to health’. The issues of nutrition and health have been mainly seen as a biological phenomenon, followed by challenges of affordability and availability, but now market dictated choices and preferences have come to play an important role on what to eat. Thus, it is now being felt that food-health domain and its outcome needs to be understood not only through bio-medical perspective, but also from the cultural lenses and market forces.

In the contemporary times, human disease profile is also undergoing a significant change with increasing burden of lifestyle diseases as a global problem. This fact is closely felt in the developing and underdeveloped nations, which are undergoing both epidemiological and nutritional transitions. It is well accepted now that food and lifestyle disorders are closely knitted, influencing an individual’s overall health. The concept of “global village” has brought people together, but it has also influenced changes in lifestyle which in many cases are alien to some populations. All these changes have brought in a new focus on the relationship between food, health, disease and culture. Further, in spite of the policy initiatives to address the issues of health and disease, not much tangible changes have occurred at the grassroots level. It is widely felt that the challenges have been addressed atomistically either at the level of health and disease or at the level of nutritional imbalances. Hence, a common platform of multi-disciplinary approach is needed to deliberate on the disease burden and food-health relation in light of biology, society, culture, ecology and policy.

Anthropology, the holistic study of human, delves into the factors that influence a particular outcome of human behaviour and its relation to biology and cultural practice. Food is the “*frontline of healing*” as rightfully said by the medical anthropologist Nancy N. Chen. Thus, Anthropology of Food is the roadmap to healing which by focussing on food, food-habits and food-ways can help us in determining the health challenges of the contemporary individual. In view of the above, the Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi has planned to provide a platform to link perspectives of biology, culture, technology, market and policy for a better understanding of the relationship between food, health and wellbeing.