Chapter 6
SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS
India is today facing a strange paradox, being home to millions of undernourished on the one hand and confronting the alarmingly growing prevalence of overweight and obesity among its population on the other. The search for solutions to tackle these problems had often pointed at nutrition communication as one of the necessary conditions. Despite unequivocal constitutional commitments and a surfeit of national programmes to ensure food and nutrition security to its millions, India is far from reaching its own targets in alleviating malnutrition. Given the labyrinth of nutritional problems, the programmes that deal with them and the actors in the field of nutrition communication, diverse strategies are in use and they are expected to serve a range of purposes such as awareness creation, demand generation for nutrition programmes, building human resources, policy advocacy, bringing about behaviour change. Given the multitude of approaches and the actors in the area of nutrition communication an attempt was made to critically analyse various approaches and models in use.

In order to study these approaches, the evolution of nutrition research and theoretical underpinnings of the field of development communication were explored to track how nutrition communication research and practice (globally as well as in India), responded to these changing trends. Historically, nutrition has evolved as a specialised area only in the previous century, especially during the British rule. During the early part of the previous century, with emphasis on poverty alleviation and ‘rural
upliftment', nutrition along with sanitation, became an important part of the nationalist agenda during the colonial times. The terrible famines that hit the country provided for a string of operations on increasing food security by strengthening agriculture and availability of foodstuffs. However, in the post-colonial era with the planners using globally circulated 'new' medical technologies to fight infectious diseases (like malaria) and to mitigate population growth, nutrition appears to have been relegated to the backseat. With the assumption that improving some social and economic determinants and increasing agriculture production the nutrition of the people could be taken care, India embarked on the green revolution and some welfare measures. Hence, programmes for nutrition improvement have generally been looked upon as welfare relief operations, rather than as aspects of the fulfilment of an essential pre-condition for social and economic development. Only in recent years, has there been increasing recognition of the importance of the nutrition factor in development, and several large-scale nutrition intervention programmes have been attempted. Nutrition programmes, still do not enjoy high priority or adequate resource allocation in the development agenda.

As regards nutrition education and communication, the present study has indicated that the obvious shift in development communication thinking – from modernization to dependency to multiplicity and participation was more or less seen even in nutrition communication research and practice. Nutritional concerns were integrated into various developmental policies and
programmes of the Government of India. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and international organizations like WHO, UNICEF and FAO are also putting in considerable efforts in taking the message of nutrition to the community. But in many of these endeavours, there has hardly been any evidence of separate evaluation of the nutrition education/communication components, making it difficult to attribute the behaviour change or adoption of nutrition knowledge to practice directly as an outcome of education or communication. There is also a dearth of published literature even of the scattered studies and smaller experiments conducted in different parts of the country, especially by NGOs, University Departments and students. This draws our attention to the need for documenting all nutrition education and communication programmes and studies for use by the fraternity working in the area.

The methodological innovation attempted in the thesis by bringing together a number of case studies in different settings and community contexts (each employing a different approach), helped explore how content is determined by approach and how the approach is in turn influenced by the context. The case studies that dealt with different approaches of communicating nutrition information to young audiences in educational institutions, yielded interesting findings. These studies supported the idea that providing nutrition education to adolescents in classroom settings is effective and an efficacious way of imparting nutrition knowledge. But all the
approaches experimented only with achieving knowledge improvement after planned information dissemination. This may not necessarily lead to change in dietary practices.

These approaches heavily relied on inter-personal communication and suggest that person-to-person communication is still a very effective means of providing nutrition education. However, they also demonstrate the effectiveness of multi-media approach to complement interpersonal communication. Even though the benefits of using computer-based nutrition education tools in schools is widely documented, our studies using CD-Rom intervention did not result in any further improvement in nutrition over the traditional classroom teaching. Most of the adolescents who received computer aided education viewed computers as entertainment devices rather than educational devices. While the significant ‘positive’ increment observed using folk-dance based intervention as compared to the traditional teaching, indicates that the visual impact coupled with folk music helped in retaining attention of the young audiences. This suggests that indigenous media can still be an effective means to complement interpersonal communication.

But the key issue is the participation of teachers and schools to encourage nutrition communication. In all the three studies it was not very easy to get teachers to cover these ‘extra’ topics outside the curriculum. The reluctance of the educational institutions to take up activities outside the
regular curriculum can perhaps be overcome only by making nutrition education part of the school curricula or by strengthening the existing components pertaining to this subject.

Supporting this argument were the observations made from the detailed analysis of the nutrition component in the school science curricula, which draw our attention to the abysmally low space allocation for nutrition topics in school science textbooks. Nutrition component is almost elusive at high school level and even if it is covered, it only deals with food groups or nutrient deficiency disorders. It can be recommended that syllabi can be modified to include many important topics such as nutrition and growth, link between childhood malnutrition and non-communicable diseases in adulthood, nutritional requirements during adolescence, nutrition for girl child, hidden hunger, lifestyle factors and obesity, nutrition during pregnancy and lactation, importance of breast feeding, unhealthy foods, fortification etc. be covered in the curricula.

Taking a macro perspective, when the institutional approaches to nutrition communication at community level were studied, three organizations were purposively selected from three different sectors viz., Government, Voluntary Sector and Research. These case studies indicated that nutrition communication uses a combination of methods, but like in any many other health communication efforts elsewhere in the world, the
methods adopted are predominantly rooted in top-down approaches with information dissemination as an important objective. They largely adopt inter-personal or face-to-face communication aided with a range of small media (like folders, charts, folk dance forms in local languages). Even in some isolated cases where participatory approach is being used, nutrition communication is just one of the many tools in achieving broader goals of community empowerment and hence lack focus. Among many other factors our studies, especially with the Deccan Development Society established that they are stimulating critical analysis, to develop confidence and awareness among communities about their traditional food systems and practices. Their approach also focuses on changing the environment in which people see themselves. While doing so their approach also seems to underline the understanding that "people" (for the process of food and nutrition communication) does not only mean vulnerable target groups as in most nutrition communication programmes, but involves diverse audiences from a cross section of groups and villages. The alternative PDS (APDS) and the community radio and video initiatives have been pivotal in facilitating the shift from the non-nutritious ‘elite’ foods or ‘Government’ foods to the more traditional millets and greens.

Nutrition communication activities of all the three organizations studied lack evaluation components in their planning. This makes it difficult to attribute any change, be it in behaviour or in improvement of nutritional
status, to a particular communication process. The necessary evaluation
cOMPONENT present in the research projects of NIN in a way make it possible
to attribute change in the identified variables to a particular communication
Process in empirical terms, but this was obviously absent in the approaches
adopted by the other two organizations.

The institutional goals and dynamics and budgetary constraints
determine the use of disciplinary and theoretical approaches. The selection of
specific communication approaches is not primarily based on normative value
of the approach but purely based on institutional factors and expectations.
The bureaucratic requirements and target-oriented tasks favour the use of
dissemination approaches by FNB leaving no scope for participatory
approaches to communication. The standard institutional procedures of NIN
in a way are based on the understanding and use of communication as a set of
technical skills to disseminate messages. In case of DDS, nutrition
communication is only a support activity in achieving a broader goal of social
change and development by lifting up the spirits of a local community to take
pride in its own culture, intellect and environment. But there is always a
concern about placing a great amount of knowledge and capacity within the
hands of the 'community', which sometimes may need external inputs. One
question that needs to be explored is whether the results from this community
empowerment and participation project be trickled up or trickled-across,
resulting in the uptake of the people’s knowledge into the health and
nutrition science as well as policies with movement’ across’ of successful
community-based communication approaches into other settings. Similarly from various approaches employed in the current study at micro-level or from the community based efforts of various organisations, there are persuasive explanations and findings about ‘what works’ in small-scale community projects but the concern about scaling them up for broader application still persists.

It may not be inappropriate to conclude that an array of disciplines and approaches, including, behavioural science, social marketing or health education and promotion has converged in the field of nutrition communication and continue to inform research and programmes. It is proven beyond doubt that no single approach will be continuously effective or suitable to the resolution of all problems of malnutrition, but each approach has proven effective for certain problems at certain stages of behaviour change or social development in certain contexts. Hardly any of such successes actually reach the frontlines of development programmes. What is more important today is to document and disseminate successes and failures of different approaches so that costly errors can be avoided. This can also produce a wealth of valuable insights and lessons, which are needed for future research and action as nutrition communication harps on a range of disciplines that account for the diversity of approaches, concepts, and methodological tools.
Despite the cross-pollination of models and multi-strategy interventions, the rift between institutional considerations and approaches for nutrition communication seems to continue. Behavior change appears to be the ultimate aim of communicating nutrition information ignoring local knowledge, with apparent assumptions – ‘people are not aware’ or ‘what they know is wrong’. The institutional choices of approaches to communication seem to emphasize on individual knowledge changes (with an assumption that knowledge gain would lead to behavior change), while underplaying the need to address larger political/policy issues that affect the quality of life. This location of the behavior in the individual is problematic because it ignores the role of context and structure in which the individuals exist, and is only cognitively oriented. Such approaches continue to be mainly concerned with measuring the success of different ‘intervention strategies’. These diverse intervention strategies have often been seen as alternatives to extant nutrition communication approaches. However, even these seem to have been systematically integrated within a single framework and positioned against the backdrop of the dominant top-down, expert driven approaches. This highlights the need to examine the context in which the organizations function. The context for many organizations is created by the centres of authority (such as State, UN agencies or funding agencies), which often define, problematize nutrition priorities and frame solutions for the same. Added to these, the institutions in different sectors that operate in tandem with the priorities set by the state or centres of authority have to
invariably work in a predetermined framework of problematized issues, priorities and solutions. They are usually dogged by factors like bureaucratic dynamics, institutional procedures, ideological convictions of the policy makers, available funding, power hierarchies and changing national and international health priorities. Juxtaposing these institutional approaches to the participatory approaches that base themselves on articulations that emerge from within the cultures, one finds that the problems or priorities are configured and reconfigured by the community and solutions emerge from within the context in which the individuals function. In such a case the organizations become mere facilitators. However, if the priorities or solutions emerging from the community are not in tandem with those problematized and prioritized by the dominant centres of authority, it calls for parallel communication processes to take various stakeholders (even the state) into confidence.

Considering that the content of communication process is largely determined by the choice of approach, which, in turn, is determined by the context (both of the individuals and organizations), there is a need for expanding the locus of nutrition communication approaches from targeting the individual behaviors to creating a conducive social context. For organizations to do this there should be basic understanding that internal and external factors influencing the choice of communication approach are not independent of the context in which they (organizations) in turn function. The
centres of authority (such as State), which often define and problematize nutrition priorities should at least cease from framing solutions for creating an environment for the organizations to explore and experiment with various approaches and to integrate with other institutions deeply rooted in a given society. If this is not done immediately, the current dichotomy of some projects aiming to preserve and strengthen local beliefs/practices and others aiming to almost replace them with ‘scientific’ knowledge may end up in causing a mere cacophony of conflicting messages than alleviating people from the maladies of malnutrition.

It will be a worthy effort for communication researchers to understand how various socio-cultural and economic considerations influence the choice of approaches for communicating nutrition information. Documenting these, would go a long way in creating an evidence for defending the argument that for the process of communication to trigger a change, the context should be conducive.

In efforts related to promoting nutrition and health, communication’s role should be seen as beyond merely producing materials for information dissemination or as a mere optional line in the programmes and budgets both at organizational and national levels. Communication should be a fundamental component of all health and nutrition programmes, with appropriate provision for budget and a strong evaluation component incorporated right at the planning stage.
As articulated in the previous sections, no one paradigmatic approach is adequately positioned to capture the complexities of the context and the process of communication. For nutrition communication to be successful, multiple levels of communication from diverse perspectives need to be simultaneously activated, with a concomitant dialogical engagement among the scholars and practitioners using different paradigmatic approaches operating at the different communicative levels. The reality of message exposure, understanding, behavioral change and the factors influencing the same can only be captured when the broader context is introduced into the framework of communication planning and practice. For this, the communicators should go beyond their institutional factors as well as individual beliefs to choose approaches from a synthesis of models and practices in order to harness the multiplicities of communication theories and lessons from the past, while addressing the diversity in the contexts.