

Why do academic achievers turn to private tuition instead of self-study? An analysis of preferences

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Abstract: The literature says that in India, the assessment system promotes private tuition at the school level, and in order to retain their lead, academic achievers too rely on tuition. The literature also expresses concern over the impact of private tuition on higher education. However, it does not reveal the factors underlying academic achievers' reliance on private tuition. This study examines the reliance, using a purposive sample of 276 grade XII students, who preferred private tuition to self-study even though they were achievers at the secondary level. Focus group interviews of the participants and thematic analysis of the qualitative data revealed that an interplay of four factors draws achievers to tutorials: The deeply entrenched trend towards receiving tuition; persuasive marketing strategies deployed by tutorials for targeting and hooking achievers; instructional strategies adopted by tutorials for reducing education to assessment-driven endeavors; and erosion of capacity for self-learning caused by tutorial-regulated learning. Even though this study has an Indian context, given the spread of private tuition across countries, its implications are wide.

Keywords: academic achievers; private tuition; self-study; analysis; reliance

1. Introduction

Shadow education comprises private enterprises, described as private tuition, tutorials, coaching, tuition, and so on [1–3]. It remains outside the formal education system but follows it closely, especially its curriculum, and offers in lieu of money supplementary instructions for academic subjects taught by the mainstream education system [2,3]. In India, shadow education has expanded into a coaching culture [4]. It has also diversified in form and scale [5], and has evolved into edtech companies, offering online tutoring services. India's emergence as one of the biggest edtech centers [6] makes it evident that the evolution of private tuition in India is marked by corporatization. The evolution is also marked by an achiever-driven demand and supply of private tuition. Studies indicating academic achievers' reliance on tuition for retention of academic lead [2,5] testify it. This study examines the reliance in terms of the factors underlying it.

1.1. Theoretical perspective

Since this article aims to determine the specific reasons behind private tutoring practice followed by the senior secondary Commerce stream students, the theoretical framework of the study emerges from the literature suggesting reasons for taking private tuitions globally and in India. Researchers worldwide have tried to list down factors that act as a driving force in propagating the coaching culture.

Bray [7] cites three key promoters of shadow education. The first is the socio-

cultural factors encouraging private tuition. Supporting the influence of culture on the practice of receiving tuition, Kuan [8] explains that the Asian culture follows Confucian philosophy of learning, which lays more emphasis on effort. Therefore, the pressure applied by private tutoring is generally perceived as beneficial. Discussing social factors, in the context of India, Chingtham [9] points out that frequent strikes and unrest due to political issues are one of the reasons for the high rate of tutoring in the Manipur state of India.

The second promoter pertains to economic reasons, which emerge from the instrumentality of education for improving economic status. Bray and Lykins [10] support this, saying shadow education is more evident in societies where level of education plays an important role in determining the economic and social status of an individual. Parents tend to prefer tutoring in societies where high social status and job opportunities are associated with academic achievements [2].

Third, an assessment system, which rewards supplementary education, promotes private tuition. This is true for India, with high-stakes public examinations [4] and stiff competition for credentials. Sujatha [5] also found that private tutoring is more prevalent at the secondary stage, as students appear in public exams, and performance in these exams is an important criterion to get the desired academic stream and thereby higher, technical, and professional education. Parents and even schools therefore defend private tuition [2,5,11,12] and students of elite schools too, seek tuition for retaining their edge [5]. Since students and parents focus more on success in high-stakes examinations, they prefer examination-centric pedagogy adopted by tutors over the overall development of students as focused by schools. In this line, Kwo and Bray [13] found a focus on the development of examination skills as one of the contributing factors for taking private coaching. Zhang and Bray [3], on the other hand, found the educational background of the parents, tutors' efficiency, and competitive exams as the reasons behind receiving private tutoring.

1.2. Literature review

Private tuition is a global phenomenon, gaining new ground in continents like Europe [14–16]. Nevertheless, its spread in Asia [17] makes it the cradle of private tutoring [18]. In India, private tutoring is widespread and deep-rooted [19]. It has emerged as an education system that runs parallel to India's mainstream school education, even overshadowing it [20]. Its client base has increased significantly, especially during the pandemic-induced closure of schools [21], and it is estimated that financial investment in private tuition in India will more than double within the next five years [22]. Nevertheless, the unabated growth of private tuition [23] has been likened to a fast-spreading epidemic [22]. It is also illegal for Indian banks to offer educational loans for private tuition [24]. Furthermore, educational agencies of the state neither accredit nor regulate it. Nevertheless, its demand expands from lower to higher grades and gains prominence at the senior secondary stage [18]. Expansion of private tuition therefore remains insulated from concerns about its legitimacy and about its impact on mainstream schooling.

Investment made by those with higher socio-economic backgrounds expands shadow education [16]. However, the investment weakens the state's endeavors for

enhancing access to education and improving the quality of education [25]. Private tuition thus deepens and widens social inequalities [26] and weakens the state's attempts to flatten educational divides. Furthermore, it affects the nature and significance of instructions imparted by schools, encourages school teachers to double up as private tutors, and instigates schools to align with tutorials and even embed tutorials [19]. Shadow education thus impacts mainstream schools in multiple ways [7]. It reduces schools to irrelevant entities [27] and grips India's school education [4].

The growing demand for private tuition makes it logical to presume that its outcomes are positive. The presumption draws strength from the claims to this effect [28–30] and also from concerns over the denial of a level playing field to those unable to join private tuition [25]. However, reports of entrance test-based gatekeeping by tutorials for filtering in achievers point to tutees' rather than tutors' role in ensuring positive outcomes of private tutoring. Benefits of tutorials are therefore inconclusive, and tutoring can be stressful without being effective [31]. A cohort comprising students who have successfully cleared public examinations, educational experts, and even administrators of tutorials hold a similar view and underline the need for SRL rather than private tuition for success in examination [32]. However, it is agreed that tutorials focus on preparation for examination [4,31].

Views on the pedagogy used at tutorials are also divided. According to some authors, schools deliberate on content knowledge, while private tutors nurture skills for passing high-stakes examinations (examinations for university admissions), using pedagogies that encourage drill-based learning rather than critical thinking [33–35], and promote rote learning [36]. Therefore, according to India's NEP [4], the time spent on tuition can be utilized for true learning. However, Punjabi [37] says that students feel that at schools, instructions are non-analytical, while at tutorials, a logic-based approach to competitive examination is adopted. Gupta [11] also found that meaningful and constructive discussions characterize tutorials, while schools deliver lectures without much scope for interaction. Authors like Bhorkar and Bray [20]; Ghosh and Bray [2] also say that the level of interaction and feedback at schools is lower than that in tutorials.

1.3. Rationale of the study

The literature makes it clear that tutorials are flourishing in India. However, the expansion of shadow education points to the shift in ownership of school education. Even though the literature underlines the role of the assessment system in propelling the expansion, it does not analyze the reliance on private tuition in terms of the factors that draw in even those possessing academic potential. Furthermore, the literature says that students seek tuition for subjects like languages, mathematics, and science, which promote socio-economic advancement [27]. However, stiff competition for admission to undergraduate Commerce programs [38] and the growth of tutorials for subjects comprising the Commerce stream of schools point to a longer list of subjects. Therefore, this study examines the reasons due to which achievers from the Commerce stream join tutorials.

1.4. Aim of the study

The study aims to determine the reasons due to which academic achievers receive private tuition.

1.5. Research question

What prompts academic achievers to receive private tuition?

1.6. Operational definition

236,993 (0.11%) students of the Central Board of Secondary Education of India had scored above 90% in 2022 [39]. For this study, achievers refer to students from this cohort.

2. Methodology

The study is qualitative and follows a descriptive design. Qualitative descriptive research aims to understand human experience in its unique context and uses flexible and inductive research processes for the inquiry [40]. This study involved focus group interviews at tutorials for inductively arriving at conclusions. During the interviews, questions probing participants' narratives made the inquiry flexible and insightful.

2.1. Sample

The sample includes students of the Commerce stream of senior secondary level (grade XII) of two Indian cities—Delhi and Kolkata. They studied Mathematics, Economics, Business Studies, Accountancy and English with the support of tutorials. As several tutorials had turned down the request for interviewing their tutees and tutors, this study was carried out at four tutorials that allowed the study but demanded absolute anonymity. However, the tutors of these tutorials refused to participate in the study and cautioned their tutees against disclosing the identities of their tutorial and school. The refusals corroborate shadow education's unwillingness to open up for scrutiny [41] and delimited the study to a convenient sample of four tutorials and a purposive sample of 276 students of these tutorials. The sampling technique is however a limitation of this study. **Table 1** presents the sampling adopted for the study.

Table 1. Sampling.

Sampling Unit	Sample Size	Percentage of students from each sampling unit
Tutorial 1 (Delhi)	65 Students	24%
Tutorial 2 (Delhi)	63 Students	23%
Tutorial 3 (Kolkata)	73 Students	26%
Tutorial 4 (Kolkata)	75 Students	27%

2.2. Tool

The authors of this study developed an interview schedule comprising open-ended questions. Three teachers, teaching in schools, and two tutors of tutorials confirmed its content validity.

2.3. Data collection and analysis

The participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and groups of 10–12 participants were interviewed before/after their classes at the tutorials. Researchers themselves conducted the focus group interviews with informed consent from participants and the tutorial. The duration of focus group interviews ranged from 35 min to 50 min. Interviews were recorded with participants consent, which were later transcribed by researchers. Thematic analysis, involving identification and extraction of codes, collation of codes into themes, and interpretation of themes [42], was carried out. Line-by-line coding of data inductively led to codes. Descriptive coding, describing the process/action that conveyed the message coded, has been used.

3. Findings

Instead of annexing the tool, to facilitate reading, items of the interview schedule and the summary of the data have been presented together:

3.1. Who decided that you needed private tuition?

0.03% of the participants said that their parents' opposition to their proposal for self-study made them decide in favor of private tuition. A student attending a tutorial in Delhi, said "If I don't make it, my parents won't blame me for being reckless and doing what no one dares". Another student from tutorial in Kolkata said, "I come, because of my parents but then I get to meet my friends, all are here". However, barring these participants, the rest said that the decision for private tuition was theirs.

3.2. You were among the top scorers at the secondary level, what prompted the need for tuition?

Most of the participants were convinced about the essentiality of tuition for clearing class XII board (public) examinations and the entrance test for undergraduate degree programs. The deeply entrenched trend towards tuition-based study and exam-oriented operation of tutorials informed the perception of the essentiality of tuition. The participants said the trend compels adherence, and the exam-oriented operation of tutorials, leading to high attainment in the past, justified the continuation of tuition for future examinations. A student attending a tutorial in Kolkata, said—"I do what everyone desiring success in exams does—attending tuition. But it is also true that tuition helped me with my earlier exams and helps me learn for the next one".

The participants considered tutorials as sites for learning. On being asked about the role of schools, they said that schools focused mainly on concepts while the assessment system demands conceptual clarity as well as practice. They said that without intensive drill and repeated assessment, which tutorials carry out, conceptual understanding on its own does not ensure success in tests. Furthermore, they equated learning to targeted preparation for examinations and were convinced that without this type of learning, which tutorials facilitate, higher education would be impossible, and schooling would be futile.

3.3. What makes you feel that your tutorial will fulfil your goals?

With a few exceptions, the rest of the participants trusted tutorials. They said that

tutorials' attempts to align their functioning with tutees' goals generated the trust. A student attending a tutorial in Delhi, said 'Schools function as per their goals, but tutorials function for our goals'. The participants said that the assessment-oriented functioning of tutorials, which they had tried and tested at the secondary level, could be trusted for guided preparation for senior secondary level examinations. A response clarifying their viewpoint is, "Unguided study can't ensure success; I trust my tutorial because it guides my study". However, a few students said that tutorials have a limited role in ensuring success in examinations, and even tutorials admit the criticality of tutees' rather than tutors' inputs for success.

3.4. Why did you select this tutorial?

Selection of tutorials was based on peers' views, ease of commuting, scholarships, and advertisements published by tutorials in newspapers. Comparison of advertisements helped to compare tutorials in terms of tutor profile, number of successful tutees, facilities like scholarships, air-conditioned classrooms, transportation, and the like. However, the participants were aware that advertisements showcased only successful tutees. They were also aware that advertisements suppress the tutorial's average score and distribution of scores. Yet, the photographs of successful tutees advertised on the first page of newspapers motivated them, built hope, and trivialized the suppressions. A student attending a tutorial in Delhi said, "Everyone knows that hundreds enroll every year in a big tutorial, but advertisements showcase only a few." The majority's scores remain a mystery. But marketing and ads always hide something and showcase the best. I also want my parents and friends to see my photo in newspaper".

3.5. On a working day, you can be either at tutorial or school. What guides your choice?

The participants preferred the tutorial to school. They labelled sports, yoga, and other such co-curricular activities as unproductive pursuits, avoided by tutorials but encouraged by schools. A student attending a tutorial in Kolkata, said "Skipping school means fruitful time at tutorial". Convincing schools to allow us to attend tuition is difficult but not impossible, as schools chase unnecessary things but understand real needs. Tutors do not have such double standards." The participants clarified that as schools imparted instructions in an idealistic way, joining tutorials was pragmatic.

3.6. Both schools and tutorials teach. How is the teaching different?

The participants mentioned five differences in the pedagogies of tutorials and schools and said that tutorials performed better on all of these. First, both schools as well as tutorials deliver lectures, but schools also adopt multiple teaching methods, including projects, discussions, and self-learning for some content areas. They said that the multi-pronged approach adopted at schools consumes time without contributing much toward examination success. Furthermore, in order to make classrooms inclusive, schools adopt slow paced and repetitive explanations, whereas tutorials, free from such concerns, focus on drill and rote learning, and accelerate the pace of instructions in order to save time for practice. They also said that the drill helps

to learn by heart, and repeated application of formulae and a set of procedures helps to solve even numerical problems. A participant said, “Practice saves time needed for thinking about what and how to write and how to solve problems during exams. Devoting time to thinking means not having enough time for all questions”.

Second, tutorials allow tutor-tutee interactions but unlike in schools, they tend to keep out deliberations and debates on applicability of concepts in real life, exploration of relation among allied concepts, stories behind discoveries and ideas, and other aspects, ignored by the assessment system. However, the participants favored the tutorials’ approach of restricting the scope of interactions. Third, tutorials teach, assess, and scaffold iteratively, in quick succession, while the gap separating these activities is longer in schools. Fourth, tutorials treat concepts as sources of questions and prepare students for answering these, and thereby orient students to view content using the lens of examination. A participant said, “Schools explain concepts, but tutors transform them into a list of questions that examiners can ask and prepare us to answer these correctly”. Fifth, schools hold remedial classes for supporting underachievers, while tutorials group achievers for intense tutoring. Competition for securing and sustaining membership in the elite group is stiff and stressful but prestigious.

3.7. Apart from teaching is there anything else that draws you to tutorials?

The participants said that unlike schools, tutorials follow a strategic approach for tutoring. The strategy aims for success in exams and involves goal-directed and iterative teaching, assessment, scaffolding, and counselling. A rigid schedule adopted by tutorials ensures meticulous implementation of these activities and helps to utilize holidays, including those declared for festivals, and vacations for intensive coaching. A student attending a tutorial in Kolkata, said “Tutorials keep us on track, rather on steroid. Can’t say about long-term effects but it’s required”. They also said that teaching is considered to be complete at tutorials only after assessment of learning, which involves regular class tests and occasional mock tests, simulating real examinations. A student attending a tutorial in Delhi, said “Question papers, duration, and the exam environment of mock tests imitate actual ones, and such rehearsals are many”. According to the participants, counselling at tutorials is also much more frequent than in schools, and it familiarizes tutees with the pattern of the question paper, informs them about their progress, guides and motivates them, builds confidence, helps to manage stress, and time while studying, and also while taking tests.

3.8. There are many free resources. Why don’t you substitute tuition with a combination of school-based instructions and self-study using such resources?

The participants were aware of the resources, their affordability, and their utility for deepening conceptual understanding, enabling practice, and self-assessment. They were also aware of the comparability of the resources to those used at tutorials. They agreed that for the problems encountered during self-study, teachers of their schools could be approached. Yet, they had neither tried nor intended to try the combination

of school and self-study. Their lack of faith in schools emerged from the textbook-dominated approach of schools and their attempts to build conceptual clarity using elaborate explanations. They said that unlike schools, tutorials understand that achievement requires resources beyond textbooks. They were also against elaborate explanations at schools, which consume time and curtail practice. Furthermore, they favored tutorials as these do not slow down the pace of instructions for accommodating slow learners.

Regarding self-study, they said that selecting and efficiently using resources, planning self-study, and following a plan without getting distracted were beyond their means. A student attending a tutorial in Delhi said “Tutorials speedily cover syllabus, leaving time for practice; use many resources, select study material for us, tell us what to study, which problems to solve, and so on”. On being probed about the reasons for outsourcing the selection of resources and management of study to tutorials, they said that they lacked the expertise and experience possessed by tutorials. A student said “...taking tuition since primary classes, can manage study without school but not without tuition”. However, the need for tutorials was found to be less for understanding concepts and more for managing preparation for examination. The habit of being academically managed was found to be at least five years old.

3.9. Within a few months, you will graduate and join higher education, how will you study?

Most of the participants aspired to admission to professional accountancy programs offered through the distance mode. All of them said that they would continue taking tuition and had already explored tutorials for these programs.

Table 2. Codes and corresponding themes.

Item	Codes	Theme
1.	Trend compels adherence; past experience satisfying	Trend and tutorials’ operations interlinked
2.	Primacy of tutees’ goals; guided study	Tutorials’ functioning aligned with tutees’ goals
3.	Persuasive ads; scholarships	Marketing strategy
4.	Trimming curriculum; weeding out irrelevant elements	Redefining school education and curriculum
5.	Condensed explanations; elaborate practice; accelerated teaching; restricted interactions; iterative teaching and testing; transforming concepts into question-answer series; encouraging competition	Pedagogies for success in examination
6.	Integrating teaching, testing and counselling; Rigid scheduling	Strategic functioning
7.	Managing time; managing study	Erosion of capacity for SRL

Table 2 lists the codes extracted from data and the themes compiled from codes. It is followed by discussion on the themes.

4. Discussion

The literature is inconclusive about the benefits of private tuition. Tutorials advertise their achievements but without disclosing the facts that could have addressed the inconclusiveness. Yet, even those with academic potential prefer tutorials to self-study. Underlying the preference is the trend towards tuition-based study, which is

hard to defy, and the assessment-oriented operation of tutorials, which benefitted the participants in the past and justifies its continuation for future examinations. The trend and the operation of tutorials are mutually reinforcing and driven by a binary notion of learning and learning for assessment. The assessment mechanism informs the notion and promotes tutorials and their operations.

Besides the reasons cited by the participants, the marketing and instructional strategies designed by tutorials also draw achievers. The marketing strategy promises incentives and announces scholarships for those demonstrating academic potential. The scholarship hooks those capable of bolstering the tutorial's reputation. The marketing strategy also uses advertisements, narrating success stories but suppressing overall achievement of a tutorial. Advertisements are supposed to facilitate informed decision-making, but their persuasive content elicits wishful thinking and overpowers the urge to interrogate the silence about those who might not have benefitted from tuition.

The instructional strategy of tutorials being free from the obligation of imparting holistic education eliminates co-curricular activities and reduces education to preparation for assessment. Furthermore, it accommodates intensive practice, regular assessment, quick remediation, and reinforcements and transforms concepts into a series of questions and tutored responses. The instructional strategy, designed for boosting performance, therefore appeals to achievers.

Tutorials also draw students because of the alignment of their goals with students' goals. Strategic operation of tutorials aligns the goals. The strategy integrates cognitive and psychological interventions, streamlines efforts, steers tutees, and keeps them focused. Rigid execution of the strategy holds students in captivity but convinces them about tutorials' professionalism and indispensability. Nevertheless, long years of tuition-based study erode students' self-belief, make them dependent on externally regulated learning, and condition them to follow instructions. The dependence emerges as a factor that makes tuition indispensable during schooling and makes it a necessity even during higher education.

5. Conclusion

The deeply entrenched trend towards tuition-based study and tutorials' assessment-oriented functioning draws participants to tutorials. Both are driven by assessment mechanisms that endorse a dichotomous interpretation of learning and learning for examination. Tutorials strengthen the trend by facilitating the latter. However, the strategies designed by tutorials also rope in participants. The marketing strategy promises incentives and awards scholarships for taking the sting out of fees and retaining those demonstrating the potential to enhance the tutorial's reputation. Furthermore, it uses successful students as models for eliciting wishful thinking and subduing critical analysis of the content advertised.

The instructional strategy of tutorials also attracts achievers. The strategy integrates instructions, assessment, scaffolding, and counselling. Yet, its behavioristic tilt is apparent from processes like the transformation of concepts into content for rehearsal-based reproduction and emphasis on practice rather than reflection. These processes exclude the scope for higher-order cognitive abilities and capacity for SRL

and aim for strategic preparation for examination. The strategic approach appeals to those eager for a winning strategy but unable to strategize. However, the strategy entrusts tutors with the tasks of setting goals, developing and implementing plans, reflecting on attainments, and deciding corrective measures, and trains tutees to be passive.

The tutor-dominated social system of tutorials impairs the ability to contemplate independent study. Passive acceptance of a trend and persuasive advertisements; acceptance of inability for self-study and submission to regulations enforced by the tutorial reflect loss of agency. Given the criticality of agency for higher education, especially distance education, which most of the participants aspire to join, private tuition-induced loss of agency is a matter of concern. However, the habit of studying with the help of tuition being deep-rooted, it is difficult to give it up [10]. Consequently, students seek tuition beyond school years, and tutorials make inroads into higher education. Given that private tuition is spreading beyond Asia [14], the implications of these findings are likely to be wide.

6. Implications of the study

There are concerns over the impact of tutorial-based learning on India's higher education, including its premier institutions [36]. This study explains the reasons for the concern. It also questions the notions of achievers and the capacities for learning they acquire at tutorials. Furthermore, it brings to light the assessment system-induced quest for fixed solutions handed over by tutorials. The World Economic Forum [43], however, says that most school children will have jobs that are unknown today, and multiple job changes will mark their careers. The study also cautions about the habit of tuition during schooling, resulting in the onset of the vertical extension of shadow education into higher education. However, the predictability of the assessment mechanisms and their demand for responses perfected through drill promote tutorials. The predictability also leverages endeavors for engineering learning. Reforming the assessment system is therefore key to loosening private tuition's grip over school education [4]. Designing assessment mechanisms that discern and reward the capacity for exercising agency is therefore an urgent need.

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