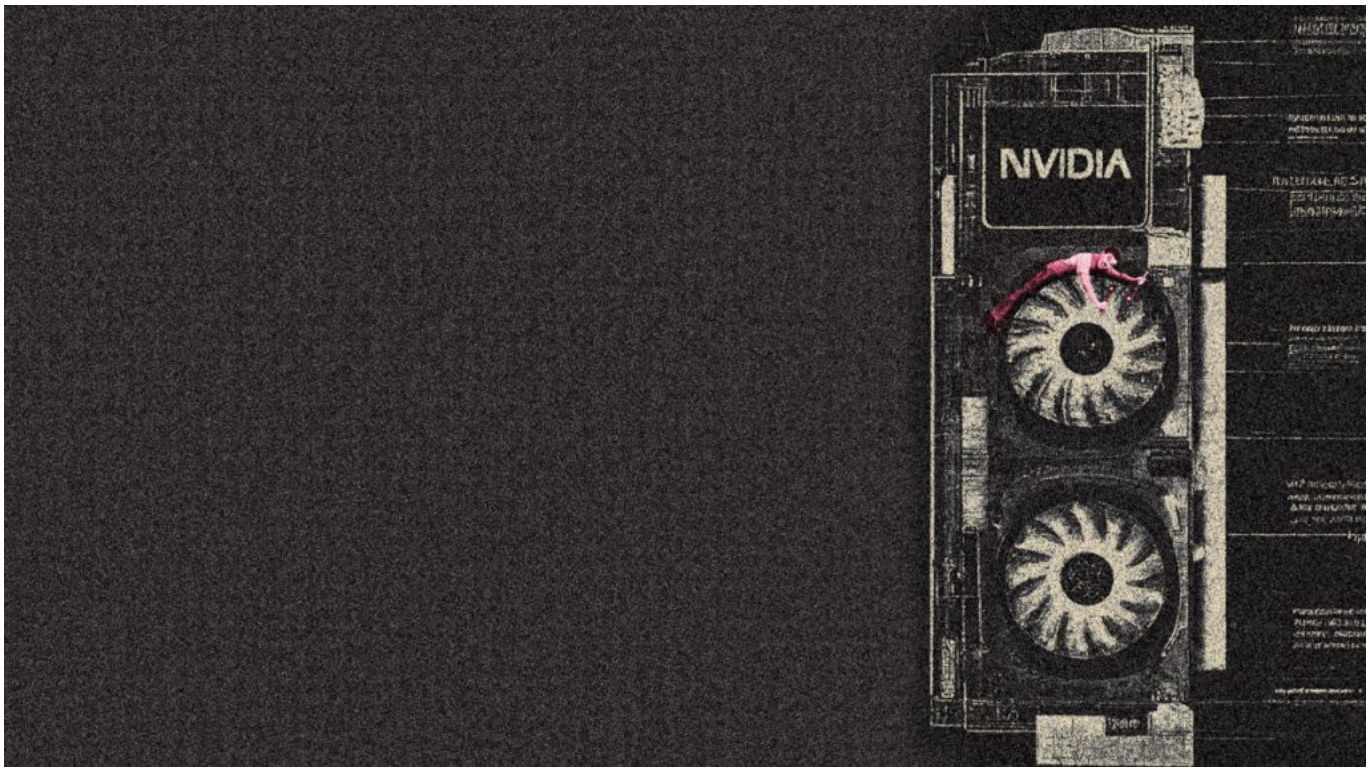
Without [Access To] Knowledge Everything Is Lost: The Third Asia Newsletter

Dear friends,

Greetings from the Asia Team!

The launch of DeepSeek, by a relatively small company, last month, disrupted the stock markets tied to Artificial Intelligence (AI)-based tech industry in the U.S.A. DeepSeek application also quickly became the top downloaded AI tools on Apple's App Store. This spectacle has kindled a broad public discussion about some of the principles that were governing the development of the application: knowledge commons and open-source.

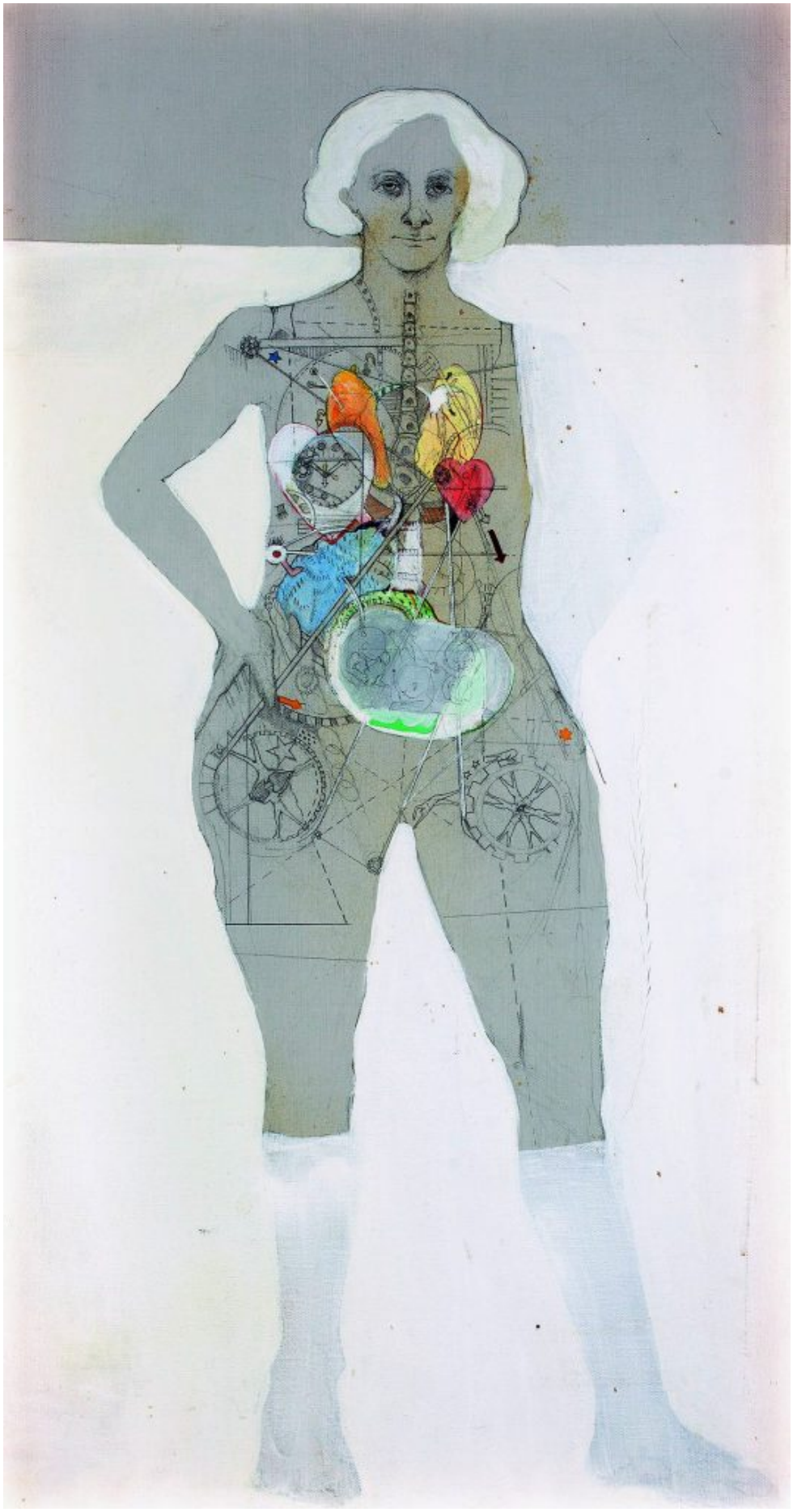
The U.S. sanctions restricting China's access to advanced computer chips, critical for AI development, initially posed challenges for research in AI. But DeepSeek's team, which comprised largely of young PhDs, by leveraging unsanctioned H800 chips, created technology rivalling industry leaders like OpenAI—at 5% of the cost incurred by major tech firms. This breakthrough mirrors the historical examples of inventiveness under constraints.



Midhun Puthupattu (India), *AI Times*, 2024

In the book, 'Hacking Capitalism: The Free and Open Source Software Movement,' Johan Söderberg recounts how the initial hackers of technology in the early 20th-century U.S. were farmers. Graham Bell's patented technology and monopoly of the Bell Telephone Company catered to build telephone infrastructure only in the urban areas. For being denied access to telephone networks in rural areas, the farmers built their own infrastructure using repurposed materials like fence wires. By 1902, over 6,000 independent farmer-operated lines and cooperatives emerged. Similarly, Prabir Purkayastha's 'Knowledge as Commons: Towards Inclusive Science and Technology' talks about how the patent systems came into being and how the governments acquired inventions to ensure public accessibility rather than letting innovation die with individual creators. He highlights the steam engine, invented by James Watt, often seen as the symbol of the Industrial Revolution. James Watt's patents on steam engine designs stifled innovation—engineers and mineworkers sought to improve efficiency, but Watt aggressively enforced his monopoly, legally blocking modifications. Yet within years of his patents expiring, collaborative tinkering by workers and innovators led to a fivefold surge in engine efficiency, exposing how intellectual property regimes often hinder progress to protect private profit.

These examples underscore how limitations—whether from sanctions or corporate exclusion—often catalyse local innovation, challenging monopolies and reshaping technological landscapes. Moreover, patents initially originated to recognise lone inventors, and not for large corporates to make big profits as they are used today.

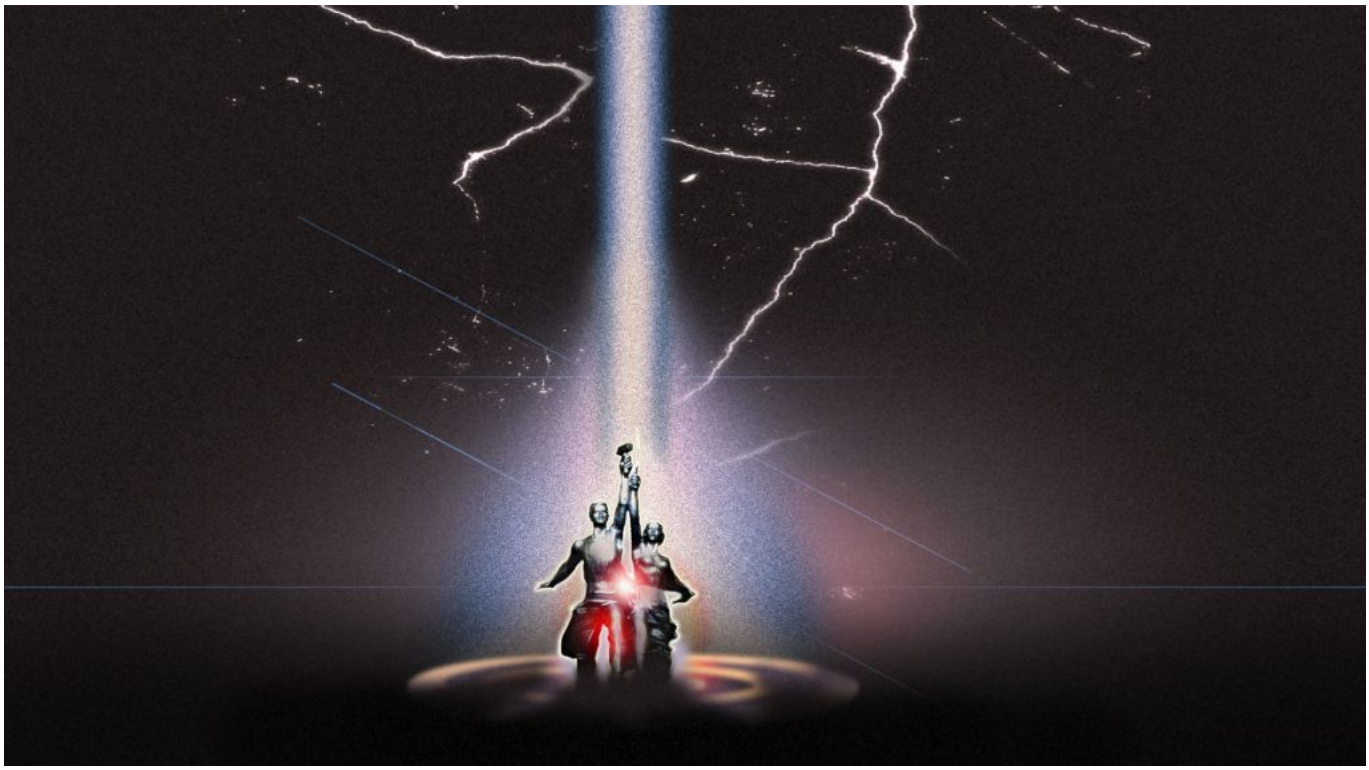


Lynn Hershman Leeson (U.S.), *X-Ray Woman*, 1966

This Brings Us To The Story Of Knowledge Commons

Knowledge has never been sought solely for its own sake; its value lies in addressing collective challenges, whether overtly or subtly. To claim that knowledge exists purely "for its own sake" is to defend existing power structures—a stance that inherently privileges the agendas of the ruling class. The agenda of "knowledge for knowledge's sake" is in an alienated agenda from the people. On the other hand, shared knowledge has always been the bedrock of collective human progress. Capitalism, however, transforms this collective inheritance into a commodity—every idea packaged, priced, and privatized. The knowledge commons framework treats knowledge as a shared resource, it believes that knowledge thrives when it is accessible to all. Open access isn't just idealistic—it's practical, because knowledge expands exponentially as more people use, adapt, and build upon it.

Prabir further highlights how innovations in steam engine technology surged when contributors began openly sharing their findings in *The Engine Reporter*, a collaborative journal. Notably, Richard Trevithick—inventor of the first steam locomotive—contributed groundbreaking designs to the journal but never patented them, embodying the ethos that open exchange accelerates progress. Similarly, Jonas Salk said people owned the patent to his polio vaccine; it is the common heritage of humankind, so it needs to belong to all of us as human knowledge in the global commons (Purkayastha).



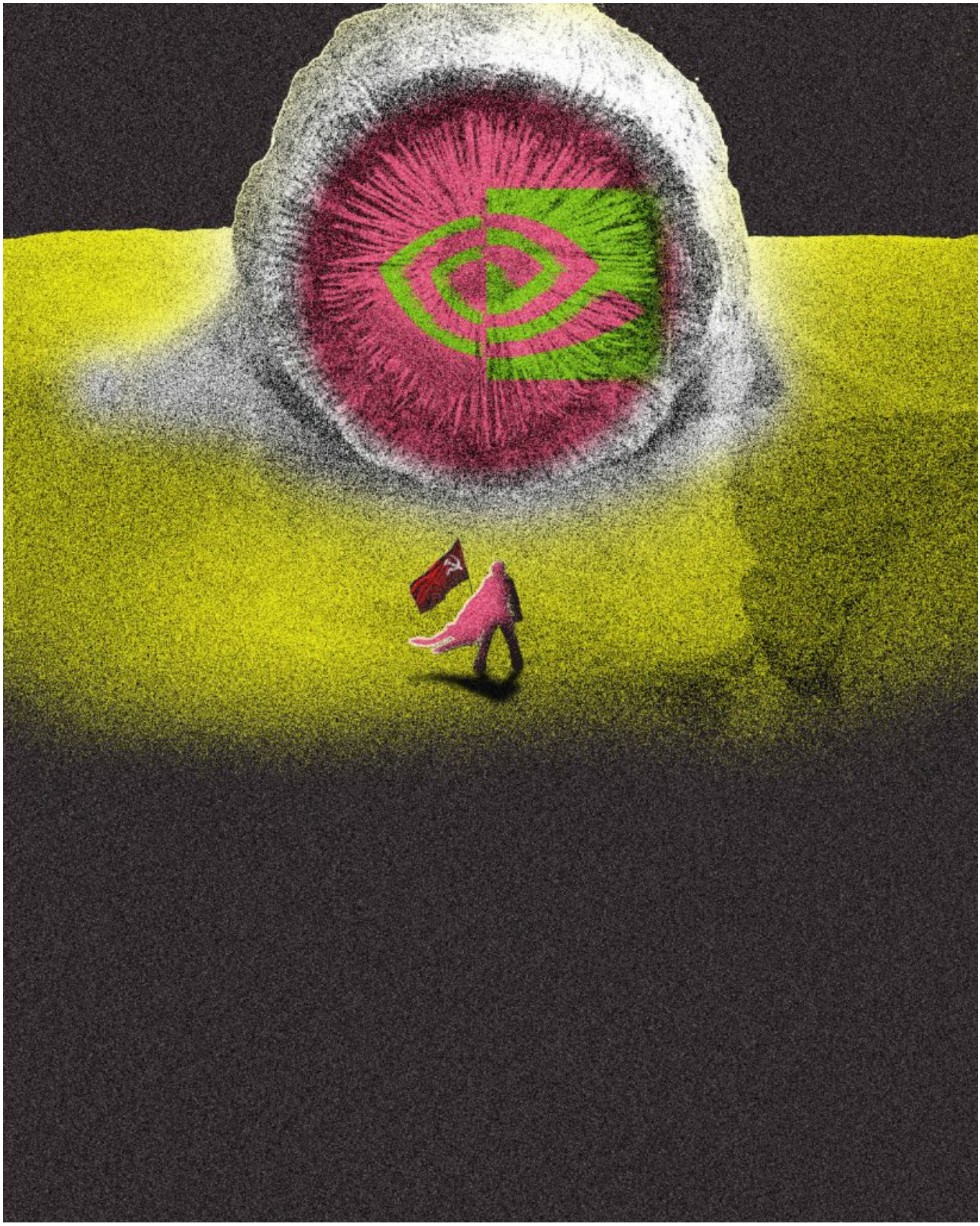
Midhun Puthupattu (India), *Legacy*, 2024

Making Knowledge Accessible To All

In societies with entrenched social divisions, access to knowledge is monopolized by elites. Historically, in regions like the Indian subcontinent, religiously sanctioned social norms – Manusmriti – barred marginalized castes—such as Shudras and Ati-Shudras—from education and intellectual participation. In capitalist societies, this exclusion shifts to economic gatekeeping: access to money, privatized education, and systemic inequities (akin to apartheid-era segregation) determine who can or cannot acquire knowledge.

When the Communist Manifesto (published in 1848 and celebrated as Red Books Day on February 21) called for "breaking the chains" of oppression worldwide, a parallel revolution unfolded in India. That same year, Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule—visionaries of social justice—opened India's first school for girls in Pune, boldly welcoming students of *all castes and religions*. Their act of defiance against caste apartheid and patriarchy embodied the manifesto's spirit: liberation through collective action. The history's rebels—from Phule's schools to hacker collectives—reject elitist control. Their demand: radical solidarity through open access. No gates, no gods, no masters." Open access advocates have built bridges for marginalized learners, prioritizing communities in the Global South and those excluded from formal education institutions. Initiatives like free digital libraries (e.g., Sci-Hub, Library Genesis) and open-access repositories that bypass paywalls and institutional gatekeeping, ensuring knowledge isn't a luxury reserved for the privileged.

Red Books Day, observed globally on February 21, honors not only the revolutionary ideals of *The Communist Manifesto* but also commemorates those crushed by oppressive systems that weaponize knowledge to enslave minds. This year, as DeepSeek's January launch sparked renewed hope for democratizing AI and dismantling information gatekeeping, I paid tribute to Aaron Swartz—**"The Internet's Own Boy"—** a visionary activist who died fighting for open access. Swartz was hounded to death by U.S. institutions for daring to liberate academic research (via JSTOR downloads), exposing how power punishes those who challenge its monopoly on knowledge.



Midhun Puthupattu (India), *NVIDIA*, 2024

Let me conclude with a poem by **Mahatma Jyotirao Phule** whose words mirror the existential struggles socialist nations targeted by the Empire are waging today:

> Without knowledge intelligence was lost,
> without intelligence morality was lost
> and without morality was lost all dynamism!
> Without dynamism money was lost and
> without money the shudras sank.
> All this misery was caused by the lack of knowledge.

In solidarity,

P. Ambedkar