

BOOKING THE NET

eBooks and Web promotions are making it easier for new authors to be heard; publishers too are testing the waters



BY SHAI VENKATRAMAN

It is said there is a book in all of us. But very few of us get around to writing. Or land a book deal.

Looking to publish his first book, Delhi-based businessman Aditya Berlia, 28, found few takers. No one wanted to bring out a novel about a leather-clad, vampire-hunting heroine in the Lisbeth Salander mould. "They were just not interested," says Berlia. "They thought I was some foreign-returned,

rich kid looking to indulge a hobby."

Undeterred, Berlia decided to publish *Tantra* himself, and went online to publicize it. For the launch this April he chose Google Hangouts (a live video-streaming service), skipping the customary wine and cheese affair. "We figured out our target audience and tailor-made the promos. One of our promos on Facebook said, 'All men are boys until they get married', and was aimed at men aged 20-26. There was a massive jump in the number of people who wanted to know what this post was about."

The Facebook page, Berlia claims, had 4,000 likes within a week; the book trailer on YouTube, 180,000 hits in 10 days. "The struggle was to get the first 500 people to like us," he adds— "(then) their friends check it out and the word spreads. This is where the Net pushes frontiers."

A growing number of writers in India are beginning to explore this option. To call just a few recent examples: Amish Tripathi, Ashwin Sanghi, Devdutt Pattanaik and Ashok Banker are among those whose books were promoted on the Internet through trailers.

"The Net has reduced entry barriers," says Tripathi, 38, whose first novel *The Immortals of Meluha* was rejected by publishers. The former banker decided to put his business degree to use online. "We felt we could convey the book's feel through a trailer. We did not have the money to take it to cinema halls, so we took it to the Internet. It's no longer the case that you need a certain amount of money or the right connections to get published. You can speak your voice on the Net."

Aside from allowing authors to be heard and giving them a direct channel to readers, the Internet is also revolutionizing the way books are being distributed, with a growing awareness of the potential of eBooks.

Thanks to the profusion of tablets and smartphones flooding the Indian market, there are a huge number of platforms available today where books

can be read, such as the Kindle app or Flipkart's Flyte. This means a huge number of potential buyers as well; a potential that the Indian publishing industry has also woken up to. Publishing houses like Penguin Books India, Rupa Publications and Zubaan Books are digitizing content to explore newer areas that today's consumers are zoning into.

"We have 510 titles on sale, and we are adding approximately 50 titles a month," says Ananth Padmanabhan, vice-president, sales, Penguin Books India. "This includes all new titles published in 2013, simultaneously along with their print edition." The revenue, though, is negligible so far. "We are currently spending a lot of energy on having all our titles available as eBooks, and creating new e-products."

The problem, Padmanabhan says, lies in the lack of an adequate number of Indian retailers. Penguin currently retails through Flipkart.com, which entered the eBook market last year by launching 100,000 titles through its digital store Flyte. Google Books and Amazon offer Penguin e-lists to Indian readers as well. "One of the primary concerns with other Indian retailers is the lack of strategy and marketing, and the absence of clear laws on digital rights management (DRM)," says Padmanabhan. DRM is an anti-piracy measure, that prevents people from making copies of files, by allowing them to be viewed only on registered devices.

While publishing houses are testing the waters, self-publishing sites have got a shot in the arm after the entry of eBooks. "We mostly deal with new content and individual authors who are finding their audience online," says Jaya Jha, co-founder of Pothi.com, a self-publishing platform. "Offering digital content makes total sense for them. Sometimes eBooks are offered for free by those looking to market something else, or wanting to spread their ideas. Print would make such experiments costly. Since nowadays books are in any case written on

the computer, there is no additional cost associated with digitization."

Many believe this could see new and hopefully talented voices emerging online. "In our country we need the opening up that eBooks offer if one is looking to make more discoveries in the world of literature," says Amit Chaudhuri, whose latest book, *Calcutta: Two Years in the City*, has been brought out in the print and eBook formats. "Right now, it is sportsmen and chefs who get published the most anyway. Because costs are lower, it will allow fresher and more interesting voices to publish."

"It is exciting to see that writing is expanding across so many genres, chick lit, lad lit, etc.," adds literary critic and columnist Sunil Sethi. "These IIM grads-turned-novelists are applying those very same models and techniques they learnt in business school to writing or publishing to reach audiences. They are unlikely to produce a literary masterpiece but they are ratcheting up the numbers, and that is heartening."

Will this spell a rise in readership? In the US, in 2012, eBooks accounted for nearly 23% of the publishers' total revenue, according to the latest report of the Association of American Publishers. Back home, the prognosis is not so bright. "It's a myth that India has a huge market for books, print or digital," says Padmanabhan.

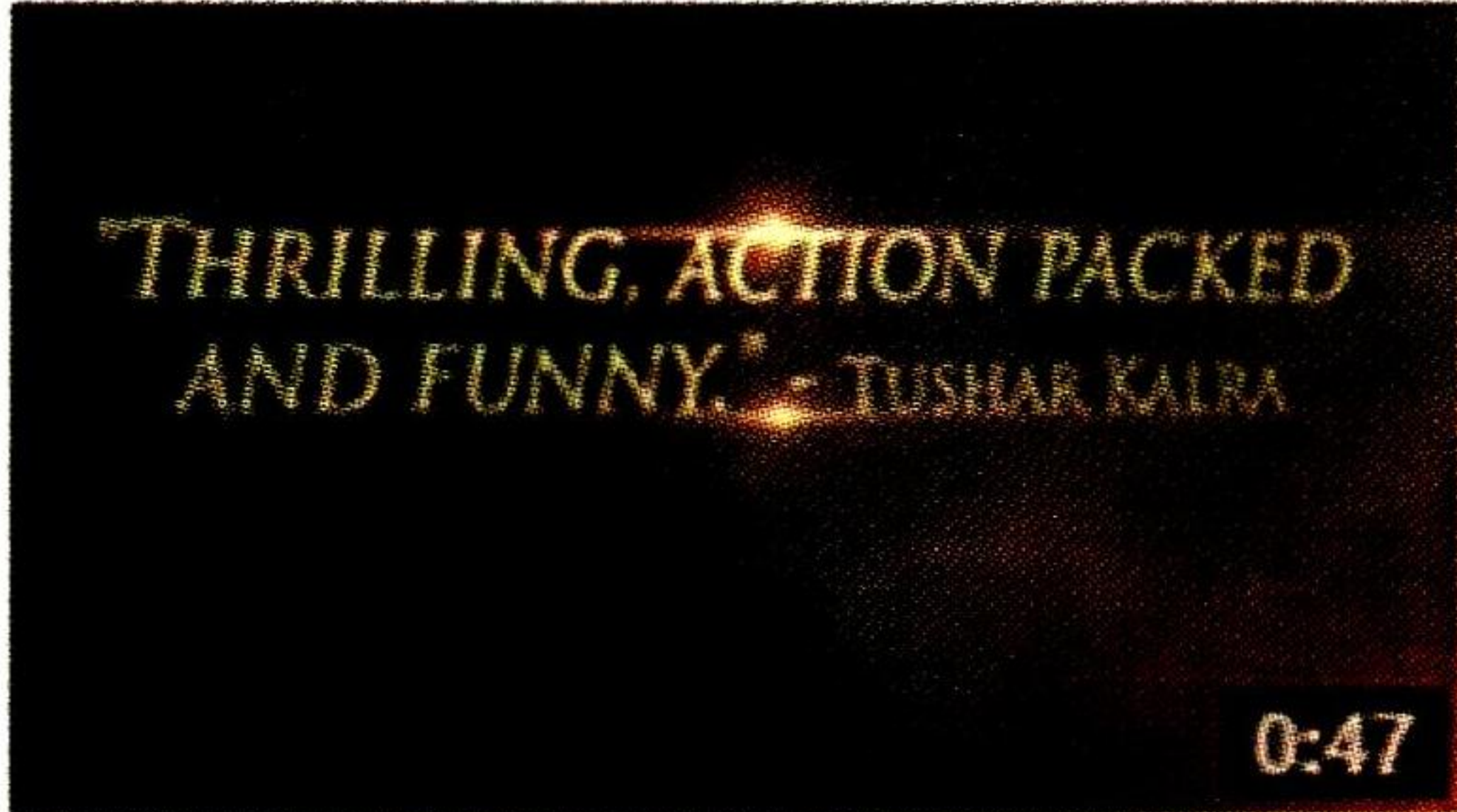
"It is a discerning audience that buys books on a regular basis, who are a small number, and within them there is a shift between formats," Jha agrees. "In the US, the reading culture was already much stronger than it is in India. eBooks took it further by offering convenience. The Indian publishing industry has to generate demand in the first place. Until then, eBooks will have to play in the same small market as physical books. By themselves, they will not make non-readers read."

Write to us at businessoflife@livemint.com

Pushing the frontier: A growing number of writers in India are starting to explore the Internet for greater reach.



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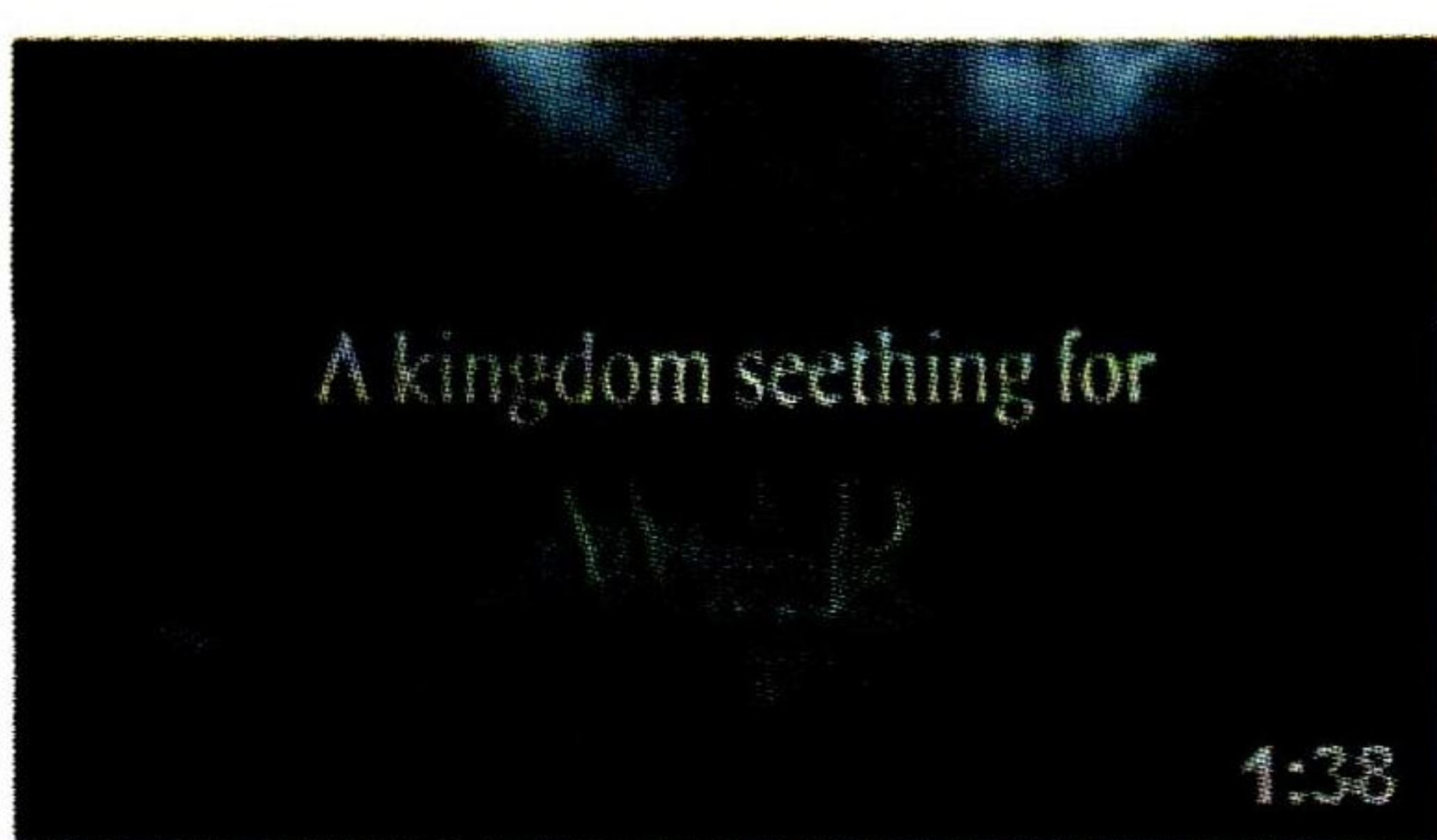


Tantra By Adi - Official Trailer

by **AuthorAdi**

■ 1 month ago ■ 231,485 views

Published on Mar 8, 2013

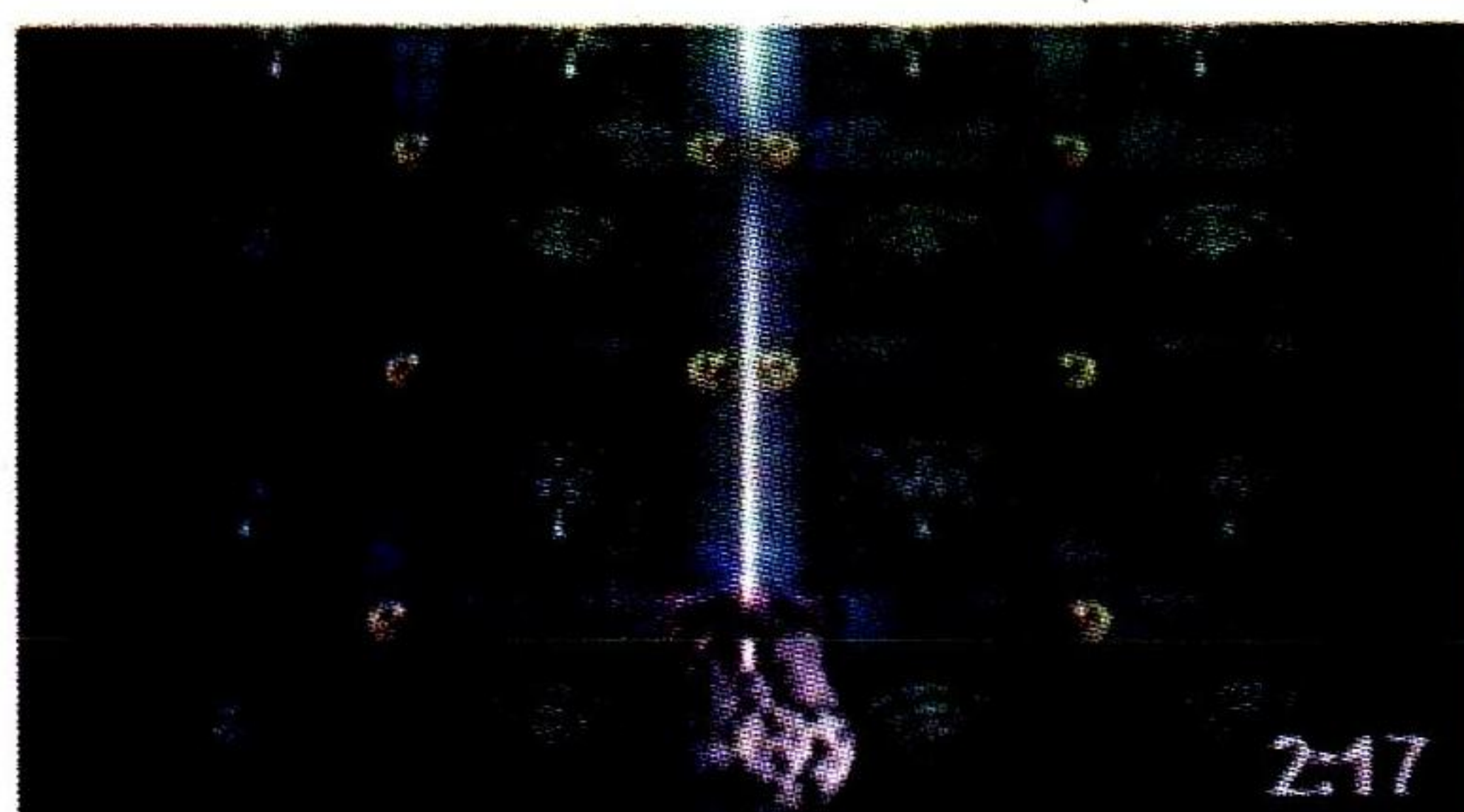


The Immortals of Meluha

by **Meluhan**

■ 3 years ago ■ 178,736 views

Uploaded on Feb 15, 2010



Book Trailer: The Krishna Key by Ashwin Sanghi

by **Ashwin Sanghi**

■ 10 months ago ■ 383,355 views

Published on Jun 25, 2012



Vengeance of Ravana Book Trailer.flv

by **Ashok Banker**

■ 3 years ago ■ 900 views

Uploaded on Dec 24, 2009

