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Kabhi Buss Mat Kehna

Karan Johar's reputation as the sultan of schmaltz spanning Sydney to San Francisco and every desi enclave in between is founded on a clutch of movies shot mostly for Non-Resident Indians and Resident Non-Indians. India that is Bharat of a dollar-a-day is marginal to his celluloid conquests. Small wonder his latest Kabhi Alvida Na Kehna -- KANK for headline writers -- has set the cash registers afire in videshi cineplexes and swadeshi multiplexes while the take in tent-cinema Bharat is said to be more modest.

Word from box office gurus in America is that Kank raked in \$ 1.4 million over the weekend, beating the previous record of \$ 1 million set in 2001 by Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Glum (K3G), a similarly syrupy, low-brow, KJo effort. K3G, if you recall, was a story set mostly in London, just as Kank is set almost entirely in New York. His previous film, Kal Ho Na Ho (KHNH) was also a Goth-am-ic effort.

Obviously, the man is on to a kjolly good thing. Drool over the diaspora. Milk the NRIs till they moo with pleasure. Give them weddings and festivals, ghaghras and cholis, and they will dance till the cows come home. The \$ 10 per ticket gate receipt is not the only lolly Bollywood rakes in from NRI-land. You'd be amazed how many super-rich desis order designer outfits you see the dudes and damsels dance in, some of them at \$ 10,000 a stitch. And then there's the jewelry, décor and the rest, for kitsch's sake.

It all began, I'm told, with that gaudy remake of Devdas, and reached an acme with Paheli, movies in which (said one American critic) "the pearls got better notices than the actors." Rich NRIs watch such movies not so much for the story as the baubles. If there is a piece of jewelry or outfit or home they like from the movie, memsahib will be on the next phone or flight home to get it. Occasionally, when they like the whole shebang, they will have the film cast and crew flown in to recreate the full monty, as one diamond merchant from Antwerp did some years back.

Watching these NRI-steeped movies, one wonders if art is imitating life or the other way around. Bollywood has fantastic notions of how NRIs live, and KJo is the master at capturing their effete lifestyle. KANK is swank beyond belief. Its principals live in suburban mansions or sprawling apartments in midtown Manhattan, drive expensive cars, and seem to do no work. So unlike many poor wretches I know who toil 16 hours a day in 7-11s, gas stations, and liquor stores.

But stories of some excesses are true. Desi wedding planners and event coordinators in NRI lands are in great demand these days for lavish marriages and festivities, where inheritances include both kingdom and horse. My favorite story involves Priya and Divya, daughters of a Texas cardiologist, who made it to the MTV show "My Super Sweet 16" (which chronicles youthful indulgences) by hosting a Bollywood-themed party -- at which they arrived on elephants -- for 500 guests.

Priya received a Mercedes convertible and an assortment of diamond jewelry for her birthday. Divya's graduation gifts included a Bentley, diamonds and two homes in India. "I was really surprised," Divya, evidently the one born with a silver foot in her mouth, told the local media, "because I was only expecting a Bentley and one house."

There. KJo has just touched the tip of the NRI moneyberg. There's more moolah where it came from. Kabhi Buss Mat Kehna.