New Delhi’s first vehicle-free zone

Why in news?

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- **Connaught Place** is going to become the Capital’s first vehicle-free zone from February, and the move will keep out cars and other vehicles from its middle and inner circle roads, during a three-month trial programme.
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- “Everything depends on the implementation, availability of alternative means of mobility and customer and trader response. If this is a success, it will be included in future master plans for cities across the country.” said a senior government official.
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What will be done for commuting?

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- Those who want a ride to go from the parking complexes to Connaught Place **will be able to hire cycles.**
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- **Battery-operated vehicles** will also be made available. The NDMC is going to provide this and the cost will be borne by them.
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An attempt to reconquer public space:

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- Urban design in India is the preserve of State governments and local bodies, which have failed spectacularly to provide a safe, comfortable and accessible experience for walkers.
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- Connaught Place is an intensive activity zone dominated by large scale movement of pedestrian traffic, which makes for 80 to 90 per cent of

passenger trips.
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- The pilot project in the national capital represents a refreshing change, taking a leaf out of the book of global cities that have pedestrianised their landmarks.
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- **Prominent examples:** Times Square in New York and the route along the Seine in Paris, and the curbs on cars in central avenue in Madrid.
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Why traders oppose the move?

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- The traders contend that Connaught Place has ample space for pedestrians but less parking area.
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- “This is an impractical decision which will not only cause discomfort to visitors but also **affect businesses.**” said the President of New Delhi Traders Association.
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- “CP is a commercial centre not a tourist destination. **The moment the inner circle will be made vehicle-free, the outer circle will be choked.** We have already seen a demo on the Yoga Day,” he also added.
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Do the restrictions affect commercial activities?

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- Contrary to apprehensions that restrictions affect commercial activity**, the experience around the world has been quite the opposite.**
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- Better walking and public transport infrastructure and availability of food plazas attract more people, improving the local economy.
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- In America, pedestrian injuries decreased after vehicles were removed from Times Square, beginning seven years ago. Globally this has been the trend too when cities curb car use and clean up the air.
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What is the loss arising from congestion?

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- A study by Transport for London in 2014-15, that found the **British capital losing £5.5 billion a year in financial costs arising from congestion.**
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- In the intermediate phase, many cities find it rewarding to levy a stiff **congestion charge** on personal vehicles entering designated areas. This is a mature idea and needs to be tested in India, under its ongoing smart cities programme.
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- It should be mandated by law that all proceeds would go towards funding walking, bicycling and emissions-free public transport infrastructure.
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What will be the real challenge?

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- Delhi’s real challenge is to meet the demands of capital-intensive public transport. As any Delhi commuter will tell you, **mobility is not the problem in the city. Accessibility is.**
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- Most people rely on private vehicles for their daily commute — for work, shopping etc., — because public transport remains patchy and last-mile connectivity is missing.
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- Delhi’s collapsing bus system cannot sustain the passenger load that any restriction on private vehicles will shift to it.
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- With just 4,121 buses, the fleet size today is at a six-year low. For any anti-car measure to succeed, the government has to fix these basics first.
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Conclusion:

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- Measures to unclog cities are often posed, wrongly, as detrimental to the economy and efficiency. While cars will continue to remain relevant for

longer-distance travel, **dense urban areas need relief from excessive motorisation.**
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- Urban Development Minister has favoured people-centric ideas for Connaught Place, including aesthetic features such as water fountains and areas for relaxation.
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- These are not expensive to put in, and State governments must extend the template to all cities and towns, acknowledging the wider social benefits.
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