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Traffic jam

India's capital is vying for the top rank in the league of the world's most polluted cities, certainly for a metropolis of nearly 14 million people. The World Health Organisation has rated New Delhi the fourth worst on the planet for suspended particulate matter and respiratory diseases. Vehicles, many running on diesel, are largely responsible. With some 1.5 million cars — as many as Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata put together — and more than twice as many two-wheelers and auto rickshaws, its air is acrid.

Conscious that this would come under scrutiny during next year's Commonwealth Games, the Delhi government ambitiously attempted to introduce a Latin American-style Bus Rapid Transit System (BRTS) last April, as part of a multi-pronged initiative to improve city transport, which also will include a separate light rail system. It was tutored by transport experts from the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) and experimented with a full-fledged BRTS on a 5.8 km-long route, with a reserved bus lane in the centre of the road and another set aside for cyclists.

The IIT experts were taking their cue from Curitiba in Brazil and Bogota in Colombia, where a BRTS has worked wonders and is held up as an exemplar for the world. Enrique Penalosa, the former Mayor of Bogota, visited Delhi a few years ago and strongly advocated such a system for the 60 per cent of the population which use buses daily.

The administration, however, did not foresee the wrath of motorists, who were squeezed into a seven-metre-wide space, as against 10.5 metres they had previously enjoyed, as a result of the dedicated lanes — though they benefited from the removal of bus stops from the main road area and the creation of lay-

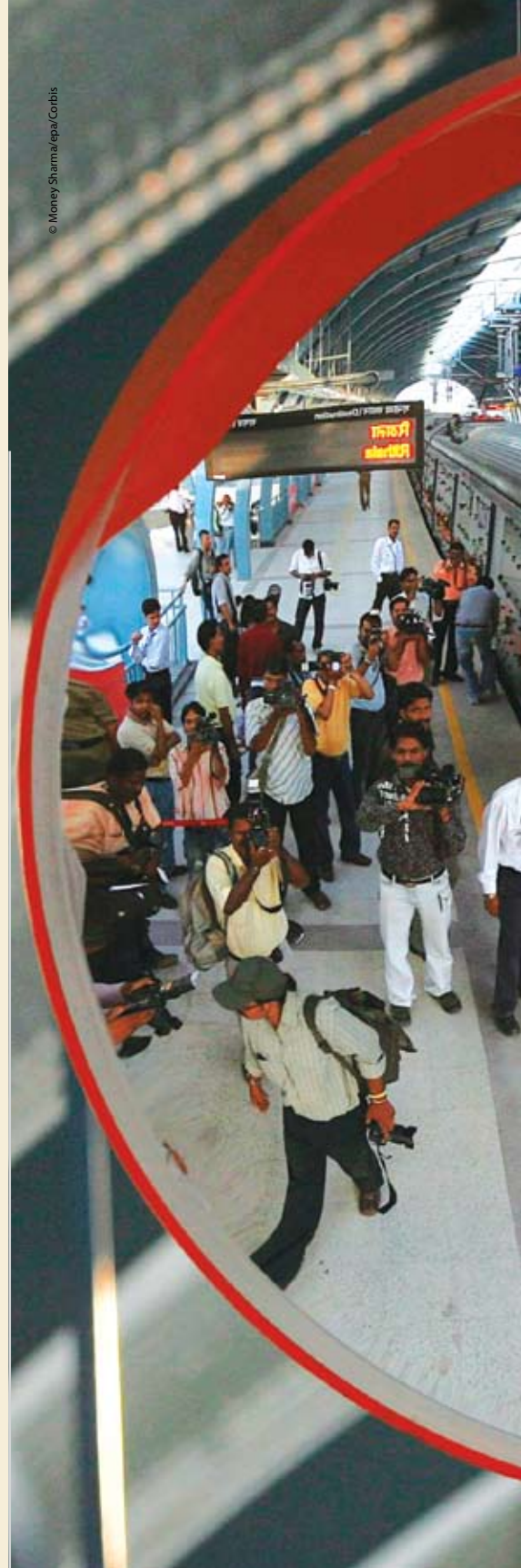
bys. The system should also have imposed some order on Delhi's chaotic traffic, with cars switching lanes at random. But the benefits were lost on drivers who protested vigorously when the first few days of the system brought interminable traffic snarl-ups. And the media spurred them on.

Gautam Bhatia, a Delhi architect and an acerbic critic of unplanned growth, says: "The BRTS has faced the ire of Delhi's middle class. Connecting the city's posh southern colonies to the working district around Connaught Place, the experiment cut room for itself on the centre of one of the busiest arteries, leaving little space for private vehicles. Unused to the mismatch of road space between the private car and the public bus, many have raised their voices."

Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit, who had been the most ardent champion of the scheme, had no choice but to backtrack and water it down. "The government was never serious," complained one expert involved with the scheme. "They never understood the system. The media was also irresponsible in creating hysteria about the dislocation of traffic."

Meanwhile, Pune has introduced a semblance of a BRTS and is embarking on a second phase, but it isn't a full-fledged system like Delhi's, with a designated bus corridor and stops and disabled-friendly access to buses. Ahmedabad is to follow suit. But the expert added: "No city or government has understood the significance of public transport. You need to give it priority. Here, there are compromises all along the way, with cars being given priority, which amounts to a total waste of money."

At first glance, Delhi's BRTS compares unfavourably with its



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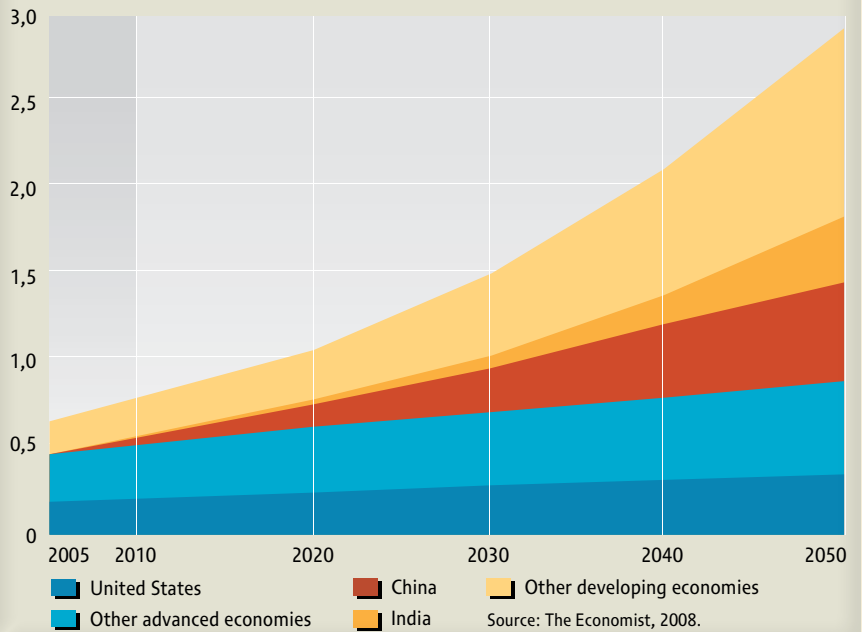
Metro, where the first 65-km-long phase opened in 2002 and its 128-km second route is due to be completed next year. It has been held up as an engineering marvel, caused relatively little dislocation during construction



and — uncharacteristically for India — is being built ahead of schedule. It started by choosing the right commuting routes for the capital's government officials and is only now connecting the better-off residential

Cars in the World

Billions of vehicles



colonies of south Delhi. It provides speedy travel in air-conditioned comfort, avoiding the chaos on the roads.

However, the Metro's 90 trains only carry 800,000 passengers a day, as against the 6.5 million who take the bus. And it is too expensive for casual and migrant labourers, who make up the bulk of the city's workers. The monorail and light rail system will carry still fewer passengers, when it is built. The BRTS costs a fraction of these capital-intensive projects. Indeed two surveys, by the Centre for Science & Environment (CSE) and the NDTV news channel, found that commuters, bus drivers and even some motorists thought that it had improved traffic. Someone has to bite the bullet as they did in Bogota where, initially, there were similar protests.

Prof Dinesh Mohan from IIT says: "People who criticise the BRTS and question the central bus lane will have to go back to basics". He points out that using the central lane for

public transport is "a hundred-year-old concept" and that all the world's tramlines were put in the centre of roads and remain there. He adds "Only in cities where the trams were taken out under pressure from the car industry was public transport pushed to the side. It took a long time for people to realise that we should go back to the idea of keeping public transport in the middle."

In 2002, the Supreme Court — goaded by the late environmental journalist Anil Agarwal who founded the CSE — ruled that all public vehicles (buses, taxis and auto rickshaws) should switch to compressed natural gas (CNG) to rid Delhi of its pollution. It was the first city in the world to do this. But with over a thousand vehicles — a third using diesel — registered in the city every day, the sheer volume of traffic has negated this measure.

"We will have to take tough measures to control growing air pollution, and fast," says CSE Director Sunita Narain. "Otherwise Delhi will find itself choked in the toxic haze of the pre-CNG era."