Iran Women's Entry into Stadiums

Why in news?

Iran's women were allowed to buy tickets and attend a football match in their own country for the first time since 1981.

Why is it so significant?

- In the recent past, Iranian authorities had allowed select female audiences, such as relatives of team members, to attend matches.
- However, the current move is the most significant, given the country's four-decades-old legacy of not allowing women from entering sports stadiums.

How did the restrictions evolve?

- In the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Iran's last monarch, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, was overthrown by forces led by the conservative Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.
- After this, an orthodox set of policies were put into force in the country.
- Among these policies were the segregation of men and women in public spaces.
- In 1981, conservative elements introduced a ban on women entering stadiums to watch football, a highly popular sport there.
- This ban was later extended to include volleyball and basketball as their popularity increased.

What were the efforts at removing these?

- In the past two decades, resistance against keeping women out of stadiums began to build up.
- In 2005, a protest was organised outside Tehran's Azadi stadium, which carried the signs "let the other half of the society in".
- Women also entered the stadium disguised as men, concealing their hair under caps and wearing fake facial hair.
- The acclaimed 2006 film Offside by Iranian filmmaker Jaffar Panahi was based on the women's activism.
- In 2013, the activist group Open Stadiums was formed.
- It has pressured international sporting bodies such as FIFA as well as human rights organisations to help ease the restrictions on Iran's women.

What is the immediate trigger?

- Sahar Khodayari, a 29-year-old woman, had in March 2019 sneaked into the Azadi stadium dressed as a man.
- Upon detection by the police, she was taken to the court where she was looking at a sentence of 6 months to 2 years.
- In September 2019, Khodayari set herself on fire outside the court, and died in hospital a week later.
- The young woman's death caused a major outcry in Iran and around the world.
- The hashtag #bluegirl trended online, referring to the team colours of the Esteghlal club that Khodayari supported.

What are the recent changes?

- Famous figures, including a former captain of the Iranian football team, called for a boycott of football games as long as the ban on women in stadiums remained in place.
- FIFA also said that they would "stand firm" on women being allowed to enter.
- This pressurised the Iranian authorities, and there was a threat of Iran being banned from the qualifying matches for the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.
- The opening of access to women now is believed to have followed this international pressure.

Source: Indian Express

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