

PEARL DIVING IN BAHRAIN

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THE pearl-diving industry of the Persian Gulf, on which most of the inhabitants of the Arab coast depend for their livelihood, has been severely affected during recent years by the financial conditions prevailing in Europe and America. The centre of this very ancient industry and the chief pearl market in the Gulf is the Bahrain archipelago. This group of islands, off the Arab coast about half-way down the Gulf, is a small independent Arab State which is protected against external aggression by Great Britain, who has been in treaty with the Shaikhs of Bahrain for almost a century and a half.

Eight years ago the value of the pearls exported from Bahrain during one season was estimated at two million pounds sterling; during the last two or three years the value of one season's catch has diminished to less than one-fifth of this amount. Four years ago a single pearl was sold in Bahrain for £15,000; during the last two years no single pearl has been sold locally for more than £3,000. Economic depression in Europe and America, combined with the increased export of "cultured" pearls from Japan, is responsible for the slump in the pearl market.

The main diving season lasts from the middle of May until the end of September, but if the sea is calm and warm diving is often carried on for another month before and after the real season. About 15,000 divers leave Bahrain each year with the pearling fleet, which consists of between four and five hundred sailing dhows, the biggest of them carrying as many as a hundred men. The manner of diving has scarcely changed since the time of Ibn Batuta, the Arab historian of the fourteenth century. Each diver wears a leather clip, very like a clothes peg, to close his nostrils, and his fingers and big toes are protected by leather sheaths; round his neck is slung a string bag, into which he puts the oyster shells when he wrenches them off the rocks beneath the sea. The diver has two ropes—one with a stone weight fastened to it, on which he descends; the other, attached to the string bag, which is used by his companion on the boat to haul him to the surface. The men who

work the ropes do not dive, and as their duties are less arduous they are paid half the amount which a diver receives. Divers wear nothing except a loincloth. The average duration of a dive is one and a half minutes, and normally each diver descends about thirty times during the day to a depth of from 10 to 15 fathoms.

Diving is a profit-sharing concern; the men receive no pay, but each diver and puller is entitled to a share in the profits of the season. In addition to the money which they earn, they are given two advances during the year, one at the beginning of the season and the other half-way through the off season. These advances are intended to maintain the diver's family while he is at sea and during the time that he is not working, which is more than half the year.

There are several different diving systems, and all of them are very ancient. According to the best-known method, the boat captain borrows money from a merchant on shore to make the advances to the divers and to equip and provision the boat for the season. At the close of the diving, when all the pearls are sold, the expenses are deducted from the price of the pearls, the boat captain takes one-fifth of the total profits, and the remainder is divided among the divers and pullers; each diver receives two shares and each puller receives one share. But the shore merchant charges interest on the money which he lends to the boat captain, and the boat captain charges interest on the money which he advances to the diver.

There is another well-known system, which has lately become more general, as it requires less capital. The shore merchant or the boat captain himself finances the expedition, but charges no interest. In return for this he has the right to purchase the pearls at 20 per cent. less than the current market price; he also receives an amount equivalent to the share of five divers from the profits. The remainder is divided among the divers. In this system there are no outstanding debts, and divers are free to dive with whom they wish after each trip to the banks.

Theoretically the diving system is a fair one, but in course of time it became so distorted by various abuses that the condition of the divers was almost that of slavery. Unlimited interest was charged by the merchants and the boat captains, and the illiterate divers had no means of checking their accounts. Provisions were charged against them at fabulous prices, and the sums paid for the pearls were never disclosed to the divers. Youths were induced to become divers in the offer of a loan of money, and when once they accepted a loan they were tied to

their boat captains for life. When a diver died his children became liable for their father's diving debt and for the continually increasing interest, which frequently exceeded the amount of the original loan. As soon as boys were old enough to work they were sent to the pearling fleet. During the off season divers had to work, without payment, in the houses and gardens of the boat captains and merchants, and their only form of appeal was to a court of boat captains and pearl merchants, who were notoriously unsympathetic to divers.

In 1923 the present ruler, Shaikh Hamad bin Isa alKhalifah became deputy-ruler in place of his father. Almost at once he decided to carry out thorough reforms in the diving system. His decision was met by determined opposition from most of the merchants and boat captains, but it had the support of the Moslem religious leaders. The divers regarded any changes with sullen indifference, having been told by their masters that the new rules would not benefit them. With considerable difficulty the reforms were carried through. The rate of interest on money advanced for diving was limited by law to a reasonable figure, the maximum amount of the annual advances was laid down by the Government and announced by proclamation each year, and a regular but simple system of diving accounts was instituted. Each diver to-day is compelled to keep a little book, issued by the Government, showing his account with his boat captain, and this account is checked by clerks employed for the purpose by the Government. An order was passed that a certain percentage of the divers, chosen by their comrades from each boat, should witness the sales of the pearls, and that when a diver died his diving debt died with him.

The position of the Bahrain pearl divers is very different from what it was ten years ago, and that many divers from other parts of the Gulf come to dive under the Bahrain rules is a sign that the conditions in Bahrain are very much better than elsewhere. The flagrant abuses that existed in the past are no longer possible, as any transgression against the diving rules is severely punished by the Bahrain courts. Inevitably many of the old men are still heavily in debt, and will never become free during their lifetime, but the younger men now owe comparatively small amounts, and their debts represent money which they have actually received. If conditions improve and the pearl market becomes active again, the debt system of the diving industry in Bahrain will automatically be abolished.