CHAPTER THREE

LABOUR SERVICE

In order to comprehend the prevalence of corvée labour service and the phenomenon of a dependent being tied to an estate, it is necessary to briefly investigate the structural features of the Dege polity. The pre-modern kingdom\(^1\) of Dege, with its capital at Dege Gonchen (see figures 9 and 10), covered an area of approximately 78,000 square kilometres and maintained an estimated population of around 45,000 people.\(^2\) Its location and extent (see figure 6) were summed up by William Rockhill as follows:

The kingdom of Derge stretches north of the Dre-chu as far as the country occupied by the Golok, and on the east it touches the Horba states; to the south it is conterminous with Ba, and on the west it confines on Draya and Ch’amdo.\(^3\)

The Dege monarchy and its historians boasted a lineage of some 50 generations, which was claimed to extend back to the Tibetan imperial era in the 7th century. It was believed that the house of Dege could trace its roots back to a famous imperial minister, Gar Tongtson, who served the renowned 7th century Tibetan emperor Songtsen Gampo. Gar is popularly credited with having secured both Chinese and Nepalese princesses as brides for the emperor.\(^4\)

Josef Kolmas proposed a reconstruction of the Dege monarchy in terms of Tibetan religious movements. He considered that the first six generations had been of the Bön faith (understood by him as the pre-Buddhist native religion) and the succeeding generations adhered to the Buddhist sect of Nyingmapa, which in turn was eclipsed in the region by the Sakyapa sect after the time of Phagpa.\(^5\) It appears that while adhering to the Sakyapa sect when it was at its political height, Dege-tsang embarked upon a process of political and territorial expansion. The choice of this particular sect was fortunate, as it was

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\(^1\) Different writers have applied a range of different terms to Dege, including principality, chieftainship, petty-state, semi-independent state, and so on.
\(^2\) Carrasco 1959:146.
\(^3\) Rockhill 1891:228.
\(^5\) Kolmas 1968:2.
Figure 9. Dege Gonchen, early 20th century.

Figure 10. Dege Gonchen, mid-1950s.