Executive Summary

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State Party

India

State, Province or Region

Assam, Charaideo

Name of nominated property

Moidams - The Mound-Burial System of the Ahom Dynasty

Geographical coordinates to the nearest second

Lat. 26° 56' 28.229" N Long. 94° 52' 34.860" E

Textual description of the boundary(ies) of the nominated property

Set at the foothills of the Patkai ranges, the <u>Nominated Property Boundary</u> encloses all elements that are integral to the scriptural image of a Tai *Ancestral Spirit Forest*. Within the Nominated Property, are the most 90 well-preserved moidams and the landscape that corroborate the image of the transcendental space or *Mungklang*, where the protector spirits or *phis* of the forty God - like kings dwell. The 95.02 ha Nominated Property is protected and managed jointly by the Department of Archaeology, State Government of Assam and the Archaeological Survey of India.

At Charaideo and within the Nominated Property, are present the combination of features that are sacred to the Tais. For around 600 years, the Tai-Ahoms mimicked these natural features (hills and elevated land, forest, and water) and sculpted their sacred cosmos. Their accentuation of the natural undulating topography by excavating ditches and

marking the troughs with moidams: densification of natural foliage by planting sacred trees like Bar gas (banyan tree), Uriam (used for construction of the coffins), sanchi (barks used to create manuscript) among others; and laying of water bodies lotus (symbols of creation) with by channelising streams that fill depressions are all evident within the boundary of the Nominated Property.

The physical transformation of the scenic natural landscape into a dramatic geography was achieved sacred by clustering burial mounds of varied sizes, that were sited ceremonially. Moidams are mounds created by providing an earth-cover (or 'Ga-Moidam') over a hollow vault ('Tak') constructed with bricks and stone or earth. The hollow cavity within the 'Tak' contained a 'Garvha' or the burial pit where embalmed bodies or cremated remains (ashes) of Kings and Royals were laid to rest. To serve the royals in their *phi*-state, entered into the 'Tak' were grave goods, food, horses and elephants, even queens and a retinue of servants. Atop the 'Ga-Moidam', a 'Dole' or Chou Cha Li (a temple) was often placed; sanctifying the Moidam. Inscribing the Ga-Moidam was an octagonal wall called a 'Garh'. As the octagonal shape symbolized universe (in Tai-cosmology), the placement of a hill-like moidam at the centroid of the universe (Garh); as a receptacle for the royal phis, illustrates the importance of a Moidam in Tai-Ahom belief system. The authentic parts (of a moidam), and the compositions; are intact and present within the Nominated Property Boundary.

The Nominated Property boundary also includes a small shrine towards the west and at the entrance to the site. This is where the rituals of *Tarpan* (libation of consecrated water) and *Me-Dam-Me-Phi* (ancestor worship) have been performed for over 600 years. Besides enabling the continuity of the traditions, the rituals, especially *Tarpan*, make the moidam landscape enclosed within the Nominated Property Boundary, the most important and representative cluster of royal Tai-Ahom burial architecture and tradition. The <u>Buffer Zone</u> measuring 754.511 ha comprises of representative component parts associated with funerary rituals, other maidams and archaeological remains of the first Ahom Capital city and settlements continuing traditional management demonstrating the 'Ahom-way of life'.

The Buffer Zone is bound by a cart path in a northwest-southeast alignment, overlooking tea estates, fertile plains and the Patkai Hills beyond it. The edge northeastern-southwestern of the Buffer Zone is bound by *Dhodhur Ali*, which is flanked by agricultural land, wooded area, sparse habitation and water bodies. The northeastern boundary along a road that demarcates the edge of a tea-estate and villages within the boundary, and agricultural fields beyond it. Demarcating the southwestern boundary is the Dijoikhona stream and cart road within the tea-garden

Within the Buffer Zone lies archaeological remains of associated with the funerary traditions like ritual ponds (*Sha Dhuwa Pukhuri* and *Petu Dhuwa Pukhuri*), ceremonial pathways (*Dhodhur Ali* and *Sha Niya Ali*), other moidams, fragments of the first capital at Charaideo and twin hills with remains of *Deo- shal and Gota Dole on* the low hill, south of Deo - shal – the sacred core of Tai Ahoms.

These remains are set amidst a rural landscape where the customary way of life and traditions characteristic to Tai-Ahom culture continues till date.



A4 or A3 size map(s) of the nominated property, showing boundaries and buffer zone

Map 01: Key map showing Nominated Property and Buffer Zone

Map 02: Topo sheet showing Nominated Property and Buffer Zone Boundary with contiguous features

Map 03: Survey map of Site plan showing attributes & elements of the Nominated Property

Map 04: DEM map of Nominated PropertyMap 05: Orthomosaic Map of CharaideoMoidam Area

Map 06: Survey showing Nominated Property and Buffer Zone

Charaideo, Assam, India

Criteria under which property is nominated

Criteria (iii) Criteria (iv) Criteria (v)

Cultural Landscape

No

Draft Statement of Outstanding Universal Value

a. Brief synthesis

Moidams (Home-for-spirit) of Charaideo are a grand and rare concentration of royal sacred moundburial landscape, a necropolis, of the Tai-Ahoms. Located in eastern part of Assam (in Northeast India), the Moidams and its associated landscape, conveys six centuries (13th–19th century CE) of a unique funerary tradition of the Tais; the ethnic group that formed major cultures across Southeast Asia. The Tai-Ahoms migrated into the Brahmaputra valley during Golden era of the Tai's in search of 'Paradise'. At Charaideo, Siu-kha-pha founded such a capital and began their legacy. They unified Assam, patronized arts, architecture, literature, language and religion, and founded the modern-day Assamese identity.

The Tais identity Ancestor as Worshippers and worshipping spirit of kings is of utmost importance. The Moidam landscape is the physical space where, Tai-Ahom royals became gods and descended to bless their people. It symbolizes heavenearth continuum and is memorialized by Me-Dam-Me-Phi (ancestor worship) and Tarpan (libation) since the 13th century CE. The Tai-Ahoms sustained this original architecture and symbolism, longer than any other Tai sub-groups. Being the final resting place of all Tai-Ahom royals, and with the highest concentration of best preserved Moidams, the necropolis at Charaideo is a rare, shared heritage of South and Southeast Asia.

The Property has the complete architectural, landscaping, and spiritual expression of original Tai belief-system. Each Moidams is an earthen mound (*Ga-Moidam*), topped by a shrine (*Chou Cha Li*) placed at the centroid of the octagonal dwarf wall (*Garh*) – the shape symbolizing Tai universe. At the heart of the *Ga-Moidam* is a brick-and-stone vault (*Tak*) with a grave-pit (*Garvha*), for the body of King. Accompanying him in afterlife were grave goods (objects of use, food, favorite horses, elephants, servants and sometimes even a queen). The *Chou Cha Li* on top is the *Mungklang*, the golden ladder establishing heaven-earth continuum, and together the 'hill'-like mound set at the centre of the universe – was the most sacred shrine.

Each Moidam is ceremonially sited, often clustered, and placed on elevated land to form a wooded 'hillscape'. The sanctity was accentuated by siting Moidams as peaks of elevated lands, excavating interconnected ditches to recreate water bodies with lotuses. Added to the natural foliage were sacred trees of ecological value. Under an open sky, the Patkai Hills in the backdrop, fertile plain land in surrounding area, the Moidam landscape is ethereal and is the scriptural image of Taiheaven. The composition and attribution of symbols to each element and formation is a unique representation of Tai ethos, and cosmos of Proto-Tai religion.

The evolution of Moidam architecture and localization of Tai-Ahoms is evidenced only in the Nominated Property. Early Moidams had wooden vaults, and later, brick-and-stone were used. The Ga-Moidam also vary - only built of earth and in others, lined by bricks, underlying the earth. The stable shape of a Moidam, engineering of a 'Tak', and use of water to buffer seismic impact - are testimony to Tai-Ahom engineering. Forensics show there two forms of creation. Pre-17th century CE embalmed bodies were entombed; and later were cremated ash. This is extremely significant for an Ancestor worshipping culture, as change in state of body signified cultural transformation to localize.

The Buffer Zones has archaeological remains like-*Deo-shal*, *Lang-ku-ri Deol*-the principal temples of the royals, parts of the capital city, other Moidams and places of pre-burial processes - ceremonial pathways of *Dhodhur Ali* and *Sha Niya Ali*, and *Petu Dhuwa Pukhuri* and *Sha Dhuwa Pukhuri* where the intestines and body were washed, respectively. Together with rituals performed (in the Property) and traditional occupation and



customary way of life (in the Buffer Zone and beyond), since the 13th century CE, the Moidam landscape of Charaideo is the most comprehensive representation of Royal Tai funerary architecture and landscape planning.

At a global-level and within its cultural context, the Property is a unique testimony to Tai-Ahom cultural legacy, technological and artistic knowledge, and ideology of "heaven".

Criteria (iii) to bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared;

The Moidams landscape of Charaideo is a testimony to the unique funerary architecture, landscaping, its associated rituals and customary way of life established by the Tai-Ahoms. These are the most comprehensive archaeological remains. to memorialize the Tai-Ahom Dynasty who founded modern Assamese society. Reigning supreme in 13th-19th century CE, Charaideo, was paradise and their first capital. It was consecrated with a royal necropolis composed of clustering of burial-mounds, that are symbolic shrines. of different sizes and is set amidst a designed Ancient Spirit Forest, with Patkai hills in the background and vast fertile plains around. As a complete depiction of the proto-Tai religion and their scriptural heaven, it is a rare and unique shared cultural heritage of Tais.

Commemorating the contribution of the Tai-Ahoms dynasty and as per true Tai-traditions, the protector-spirits of kings descend earth during the annual Ancestor Worship at Moidams landscape of Charaideo. This continuing of a 600 years old tradition, making this Property a totem for Tai-Ahoms and exceptional.

Criteria (iv) to be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history;

The Moidams and its landscape at Charaideo is a unique and superlative typology of royal Necropolis design. It is rare complete vocabulary of architecture, landscaping, and tangible manifestation of spiritualism of proto-Tai belief system. Each Moidams is an earthen mound (Ga-Moidam), topped by a shrine (Chou Cha Li) placed at the centroid of the octagonal dwarf wall (Garh) – the shape symbolizing Tai universe. At the heart of the Ga-Moidam is a brick-andstone vault (Tak) with a grave-pit (Garvha), for the body of King. Accompanying him in afterlife were grave goods (objects of use, food, favorite horses, elephants, servants and sometimes even a queen). The Chou Cha Li on top is the Mungklang, the golden ladder establishing heaven-earth continuum and together the 'hill'-like mound set at the center of the universe – was the most sacred shrine. The Moidam is placed at the apex of the elevated land, forming a peaks in a landscape designed by mimicking undulating hill-scape forest, river, set in 'golden rice fields', with mountains in the backdrop and under the expansive sky. This makes the Moidam landscape an ethereal depiction of an Ancient Spirit Forest with a series of shrines and memorialized by annual Ancestral Worship.

The change in material of construction of the *Tak*, from wood to brick-and-stone; and two types of *Ga-Moidam* – one with earth, and another underlain with a brick layer – illustrate the evolution of Moidams architecture in the Property. The existence of two forms of burials practice in the Property, were primary burial predating 17th century CE and secondary thereafter, are critical evidence of how the Tai-Ahoms localized. These are the rare evidence of evolution of Moidam architecture and the localization of Tai-Ahoms. The latter was instrumental – having a catalytic effect by unifying and founding the modern Assamese society.



Criteria (v) to be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, landuse, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change;

The Moidam landscape at Charaideo is an outstanding land-use of a sacred royal necropolis and is a symbolic heaven-earth continuum for Tai-Ahoms. For the Tais, this is a superlative typology of land-use, as a necropolis is where their God-like Kings, become Spirit Gods and descend here, on earth, during Ancestor Worship to bless their progeny. It is composed by clustering of burial-mounds, that are symbolic shrines, of different sizes and is set amidst a designed Ancient Spirit Forest, with Patkai hills in the background and vast fertile plains around - is a sacred and unique depiction of Tai heaven. The sanctity of design is reinforced by annual performance of Ancestor Worship here; and the continuity of customary way of life, in the surrounding (Buffer Zone); for 600 years.

c. Statement of integrity

The Property and Buffer Zone is of adequate size and encloses all attributes that convey the royal funerary architecture, landscaping and testifies the role of the Kings to form Assamese society. It is the best-preserved specimens of royal Tai-Ahom necropolis reflecting Proto-Tai religion.

The Garvha, Tak, Dole or Chou Cha Li, Ga-Moidam and Garh, that make a complete Moidam and these dramatically vary in volume (0.12 to 17 mt high and 7.5 to 50 mt diameter). These are clustered and set in a designed Ancestral Spirit Forest, by accentuating each natural features. Moidams show the two phases of its evolution manifesting in variation is material used to construct Ga-Moidams and Taks. In the Garvha, are present primary (embalmed body) and secondary (ash) burials, indicating the process of Tai-localization and grave goods entombed with royals for after life. These are all in a good state of preservation. Together with other archaeological remains like Sha Dhuwa Pukhuri and Petu Dhuwa Pukhuri, for washing the dead, funerary pathways - Sha Niya Ali and Dhodhur Ali, in Buffer Zone, image the funerary process. The importance of the Property is reinforced bv continuity of Me-Dam-Me-Phi and Tarpan, where royals are venerated for 600 years. It demonstrates core Proto-Tai belief, establishing the Moidam landscape as a heaven-earth continuum, the most important cultural-maker for Ancestor Worshiping Tai-Ahom

The Property is protected by Archaeological Survey of India and Directorate of Archaeology, Government of Assam. Moidams are structurally robust and have survived high - intensity earthquakes, frequent tremors, and heavy rainfall through conservation of natural and built heritage.

d. Statement of Authenticity

Moidams, together with The its at Charaideo, is the landscape most form of Tai-Ahom authentic funerary architecture. landscaping. symbolism. and rituals. Located amidst, with Patkai hills in the backdrop, surrounded with rice fields, villages, and flowing streams; the designed sacred Ancestral Spirit Forest of the Property has dense foliage, water-body, flowers et al conveying the scriptural image of Tai-heaven. Amplifying the sanctity of the landscape, were clustered Moidams on elevated land, likes peaks, and are composed of component-parts, authenticated by Buranjis (royal chronicles). The Ga-Moidam encases a Tak, topped by a Chou Cha Li, and are at the centroid of a Garh. On the floor of Tak, is a Garvha grave goods and body were placed. The change in material of construction of the *Tak*, from wood to brick-and-stone; and two types of Ga-Moidam - one with earth, and another underlain with a brick layer - illustrate the evolution of Moidams architecture in the Property. The existence of two forms of burials, were primary burial predating 17th century CE and secondary thereafter are critical evidence of how Tai-Ahom localized.

Comprising graves of all royals of Tai-Ahom Dynasty, this Royal necropolis, is the only heaven-earth continuum and this symbolic transformation of the Property is celebrated annually through *Me-Dam-Me-Phi* (ancestor worship) and *Tarpan* (libation). The archaeological remains, rural landscape and customary like present in the Buffer Zone, enhances the understanding of the funerary traditions and the characteristic Tai-Ahom culture.

Buranjis are the most important and the authentic source of information on the location and setting, design, usage of material, technology and associated traditions of the Royal Necropolis landscape and its spiritual manifestations.

e. Requirements for protection and management

The Property and Buffer zones are jointly conserved, protected and managed by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and the State Department of Archaeology (DA) under the Ancient Monuments and Sites Remains Act' 1958 (Amended in 2010) and by the Assam Ancient Monuments and Records Act 1959 respectively. Decisions pertaining standards of to structural conservation, maintenance of landscape, chemical preservation and stakeholder engagement are undetaken as per the National Policy for Conservation of the Ancient Monuments, Archaeological Sites and Remains, 2014. The moidams are structurally robust by design and require primarily three types of regular maintenance - drainage and waterproofing, consolidation of earth-cover of the mounds and landscape management. Other forms of conservation work include chemical preservation of gravegoods, sealing of perforations made by treasure-seekers and periodic consolidation and repair. The Buffer Zone is managed by the National Monument Authority vide Ancient Monument and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act (AMASR), 1958, (Amendment and Validation, 2010) in consultation with the various departments in the State Government of Assam.

The protection and management of the Property and its Buffer Zone shall be guided by a five-year project called 'Infrastructure/ Protection, Preservation of Charaideo Maidams Archaeological Site'. The overall scope of this project includes conducting feasibility studies, prospecting means of community engagement including tourism, scheduling conservation action plans, and identifying scope for research. This project is ongoing.





Name and contact information of official local institution/ agency/ organization

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TOPO SHEET MAP SHOWING NOMINATED PROPERTY AND BUFFER ZONE, CHARAIDEO, ASSAM (INDIA)











