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SACRED SYMBOLS IN A SECULAR STATE: STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE CONTINUITY OF THE ASTAMANGALA IN POST-1975 SIKKIMESE ALMANACS

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Abstract

The year 1975 marked a watershed in Sikkim's political history as the monarchical kingdom became the 22nd state of the Indian Union. This transfer of power from the Chogyal to elected representatives reshaped institutional life, including the official government almanac. While pre-1975 almanacs reflected a monarchical framework rooted in Buddhist traditions, post-1975 editions gradually adopted a secular orientation aligned with the Indian Constitution. Notably, however, the *Astamangala* (*Tashi Tagey*, or eight auspicious symbols) remained intact after 1975.

This paper examines the structural transformations in Sikkim's almanac following statehood and analyses the significance of retaining these sacred symbols across five decades. Using a qualitative, comparative methodology, the study analyses primary government almanacs from 1974 and 2025 alongside secondary sources.

Findings reveal a major expansion in holiday listings, incorporating festivals from diverse communities alongside Indian national holidays reflect democratic integration and constitutional secularism. Simultaneously, the enduring presence of the Astamangala demonstrates iconographic resilience, showing how deep-rooted cultural heritage and regional identity persist within a modern secular framework.

Key words: Sikkim, transfer of power, Pre-1975 and Post-1975 almanac, Astamangala (Tashi Tagey),

Introduction

The year 1975 marked a watershed moment in Sikkim's political history, as the kingdom ended its monarchy and became the 22nd state of the Indian Union through the 36th Constitutional Amendment Act on 16 May 1975 (Lachungpa, 2013 p.267). Kharel et al. (2013) stated that a new political era characterized by a democratic framework was introduced in Sikkim. Subsequently, its administrative framework was restructured to adopt the Indian system of governance.

This political transition also directly reshaped the state's official almanac, underscoring how administrative records are transformed by shifts in power and why almanacs serve as vital primary sources for tracing political history. State almanacs act as direct reflections of state administration and any transition in political authority or governance structure inevitably reshapes them. Andries (1989) in her work titled 'Almanacs: Revolutionizing a Traditional Genre' examines how the political transition of the French Revolution transformed French almanacs including official state calendars to reflect new revolutionary ideology and administration. Likewise Richard J. Smith (1992) demonstrates how issuing the calendar was an act of imperial sovereignty and how political transitions (like the Ming-to-Qing shift) immediately altered the

almanac, and how it functioned to standardize time, ritual, and local administration across the empire. Both Richard J. Smith (1992) and Lise Andries (1989) treat almanacs not as passive timekeeping devices, but as deeply political texts that reflect the nature of state authority.

In the Sikkim context the pre-1975 almanacs linked the monarch's sovereignty to sacred Buddhist cosmology, ritual time, and traditional state administration whereas the post-1975 transformation brought a fundamental shift in the system of governance (from monarchy to constitutional democracy) and altered to a great extent the content, official holidays, and administrative markers within the almanac to reflect a new political order.

Official state almanacs are more than just administrative tools for tracking holidays and civil duties; they are key records of political authority, cultural memory, and national identity. By deciding which religious festivals, royal milestones, or constitutional holidays receive official recognition, an almanac reflects the core values of the government that creates it. Sikkim's 1975 merger with India clearly shows how major political shifts change the way a calendar is designed. When this former Himalayan Buddhist kingdom ruled for over three centuries by the Namgyal House became the 22nd state of India, its governance, demographics, and official symbols were completely reshaped (Datta-Ray, 1984; Sinha, 2008).

This paper examines the post-1975 almanac as an intentional instrument of cultural statecraft. By analysing the structural layout, iconographic framing, and expanding holiday ledger across the 1974 divide, this study demonstrates how the democratic state deployed the Astamangala to bridge political legitimacy, mitigate anxieties of cultural erasure, and visually unify a newly pluralistic civic order within a familiar sacred frame.

While scholarly literature on post-1975 Sikkim has extensively examined constitutional transitions, party politics, ethnic mobilization, and socio-economic development (Hiltz, 2003; Kazi, 2009), comparatively little attention has been paid to how state-issued visual and calendrical artifacts negotiate the tension between constitutional secularism and indigenous cultural heritage.

This article is an attempt to address this gap by conducting a comparative textual and iconographic analysis of Sikkim's official almanacs across the 1975 historical divide. Specifically, it examines how the structural transformation of the almanac from a monarchical-Buddhist calendar to a pluralistic, secular state document co-exists with the uninterrupted preservation of the *Astamangala*.

Research Questions

1. How did the layout, official framing, and public role of Sikkim's government almanac change as the state moved from a monarchy to an Indian state?
2. How do changes in the holiday lists between the 1974 and 2025 almanacs show how Sikkim balances different religions, languages, and ethnic groups under Indian secularism?
3. How has the visual presentation of the Astamangala (Tashi Tagey) survived or adapted from 1974 to 2025, and what does the continuity of these sacred symbols mean?

Data and Methodology

This study uses a qualitative, mixed-source comparative research design integrating textual analysis and visual iconography to examine structural changes and symbolic continuity in Sikkim's official almanacs across the 1975 historical divide.

Primary Data Sources: The primary empirical corpus consists of two official government almanacs selected as longitudinal benchmarks flanking Sikkim's 1975 merger with the Indian Union:

1. The 1974 Pre-Merger Almanac**:** Issued under the monarchical administration of the Chogyal (*Sikkim Darbar*), representing the institutional, calendrical, and iconographic conventions of the pre-1975 Kingdom of Sikkim.
2. The 2026 Post-Merger Almanac: Published by the Government of Sikkim, representing contemporary state administration more than five decades after Sikkim's integration as the 22nd state of the Indian Union.

Secondary sources: To contextualize the primary almanacs within Sikkim's broader political, constitutional, and cultural history, secondary sources were used for Sikkim's 1975 political transition.

DISCUSSION ON THE STRUCTURAL CHANGE OF THE ALMANAC

The official Almanac of Sikkim was introduced in the 1950s during the reign of Chogyal Sir Tashi Namgyal. It was primarily intended to inform the people travelling from remote villages to the capital, Gangtok, for official work about scheduled government holidays. Thereby preventing arduous and unnecessary journeys when offices were closed (Upadhyay, 2012). It has functioned as both a practical timetable and a visual emblem of state authority.

Between 1974 and the post-1975 era, Sikkim experienced one of the most consequential political transformations in modern Himalayan history, shifting from a hereditary Buddhist monarchy to a democratic state within the Indian Union. This change in Governmental system had its implication in the structure of the state official almanac.

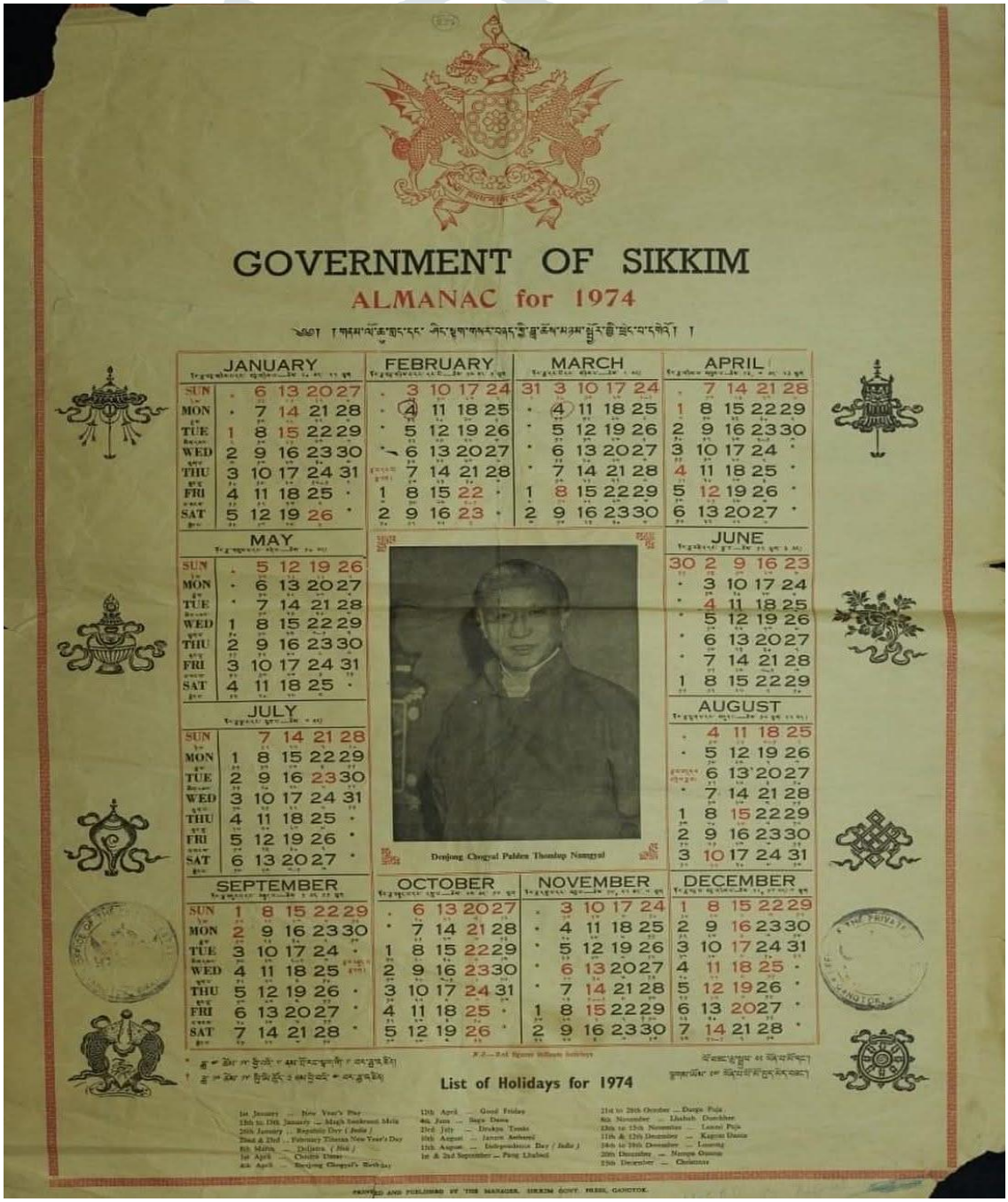


Figure No.1: Government of Sikkim, Almanac for 1974
Source: From *Almanac 1974* [By Government of Sikkim] [Photograph], by D. Chettri [@fastestfastsikkim], March 11, 2022, Instagram (https://www.instagram.com/fastestfastsikkim/).

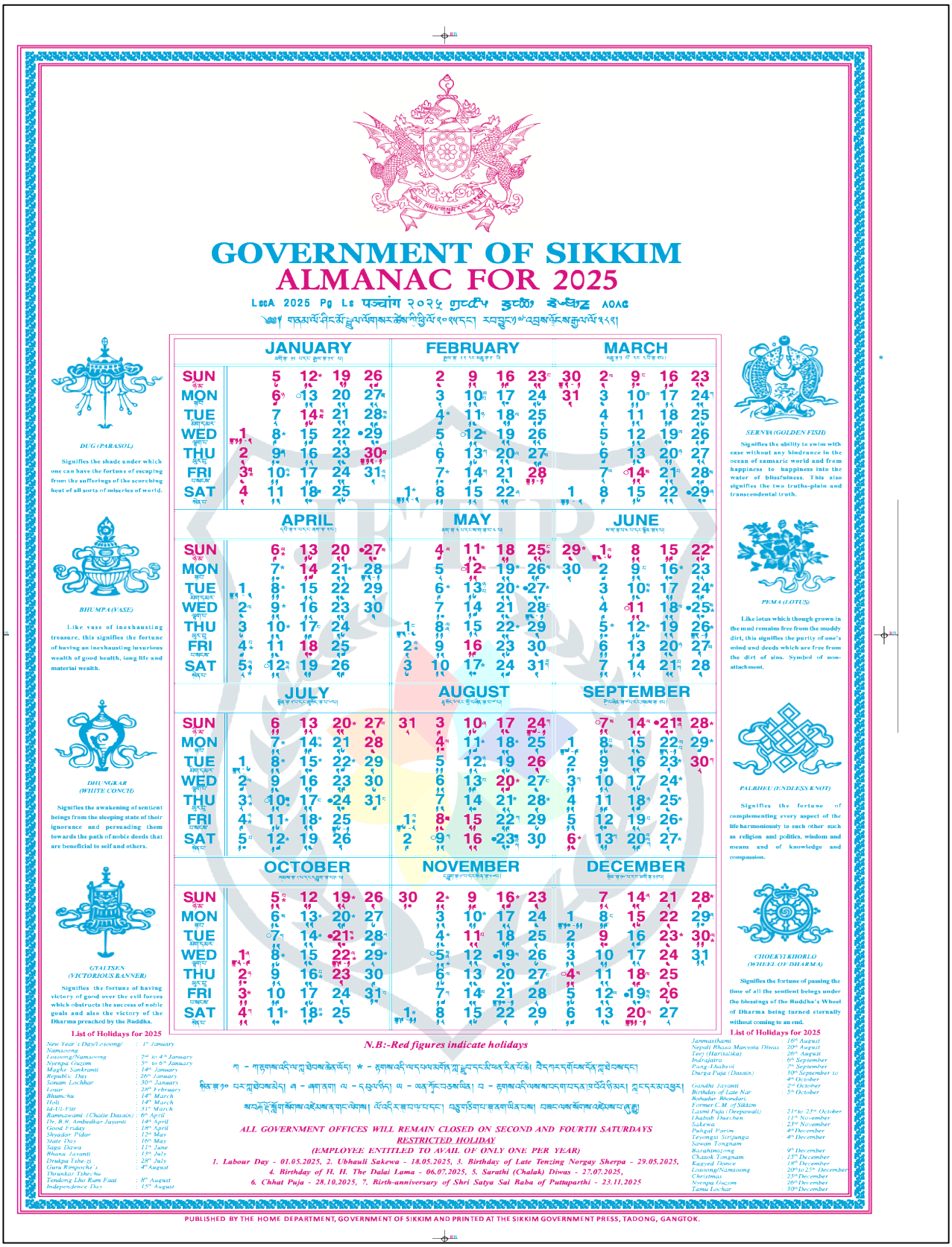


Figure No.2: Government of Sikkim, Almanac of 2025
Source: IPR Department, Government of Sikkim

A side-by-side examination of the 1974 Sikkim Almanac and its post-1975 (for this paper 2025 edition is used) successors reveal a striking visual paradox. At the centre of the page, the markers of sovereign power underwent a decisive change with the removal of the Chogyal's picture as shown in 2025 edition (Figure 2). The 1974 almanac (Figure 1) shows the picture of the last Chogyal of Sikkim Palden Thondup Namgyal in the centre of the almanac. This is one of the defining structural change demonstrating political transition. The authority over the almanac was transferred to the Home Department of the Government of Sikkim from the Chogyal administration. Thereafter, the calendar's red-letter holiday grid expanded dramatically to accommodate Indian national observances alongside a growing spectrum of ethnic and linguistic community

festivals. This is evident in the two almanacs, while the 1974 almanac (Figure 1and Table 1) lists 20 red-letter holidays; the 2025 edition (Figure 2 and Table 1) records a substantial increase with over 40 which is more than double the figure of the 1974 edition. Further, 2025 edition also includes 7 restricted holidays. This expansion reflects the evolving state policies, broader recognition of diverse communities, and the commemoration of key national milestones.

Table No. 1:Comparision of Holidays marked in the Pre and post-1975 almanac

	Almanac	Buddhist religious festivals	National/Statehood	Community/ Ethnic	Total
1	1974	5	2 (India related),1 Chogyal's birthday, 1 new year	11	20
2	2025	7	7	28	42

Source: Government of Sikkim Almanac 1974 and 2025

Table No.1 demonstrates the comparison between the pre and post-1975 editions of the Government of Sikkim Almanac showing the change which took place in the structure of the Almanac. 1974 almanac shows 20 red -letter holidays whereas 2025 almanac shows 42 and 7 restricted holidays.

The post-1975 edition does not carry the holiday marked for Chogyal's birthday which existed in the 1974 almanac reflecting the impact of the transition to democratic state within the Indian Union. The incorporation of Indian National Holidays (Republic Day, Independence Day, Gandhi Jayanti, and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Jayanti) alongside State Day (16th May) commemorates Sikkim's 1975 integration into the Indian Union. Further it also includes the birth anniversary of former Chief Minister Late Nar Bahadur Bhandari as a marker of post-1975 electoral politics.

Another key shift in the document's visual and institutional structure is the inclusion of additional languages. At the top of the 2025 edition sits a five-script multilingual title block namely English, Bhutia, Lepcha, Nepali, and Limbu which were introduced in the post-1975 period reflecting an inclusive design. The incorporation of the five-script title block represents not merely a cosmetic update, but it reshapes the almanac's design and identity to reflect post-1975 linguistic diversity. In other words it transforms the almanac from a purely functional timekeeping tool into a state-sanctioned symbol of linguistic inclusivity.

At the margins, however, the almanac remained anchored in sacred continuity. The traditional border on the almanac with the *Astamangala* (Buddhist Eight auspicious Symbols , *Tashi Tagey)* were retained which serve as an anchoring symbol of cultural continuity that bridges pre-1975 heritage with post-1975 civic identity. Hence rather than disappearing under a secular framework, these symbols were repurposed as markers of regional heritage, cultural preservation, and Sikkimese distinctiveness within the broader Indian polity. Ultimately, the trajectory of the *Astamangala* in official almanacs demonstrates how traditional iconography serves as a medium of symbolic continuity amid radical political transformation.

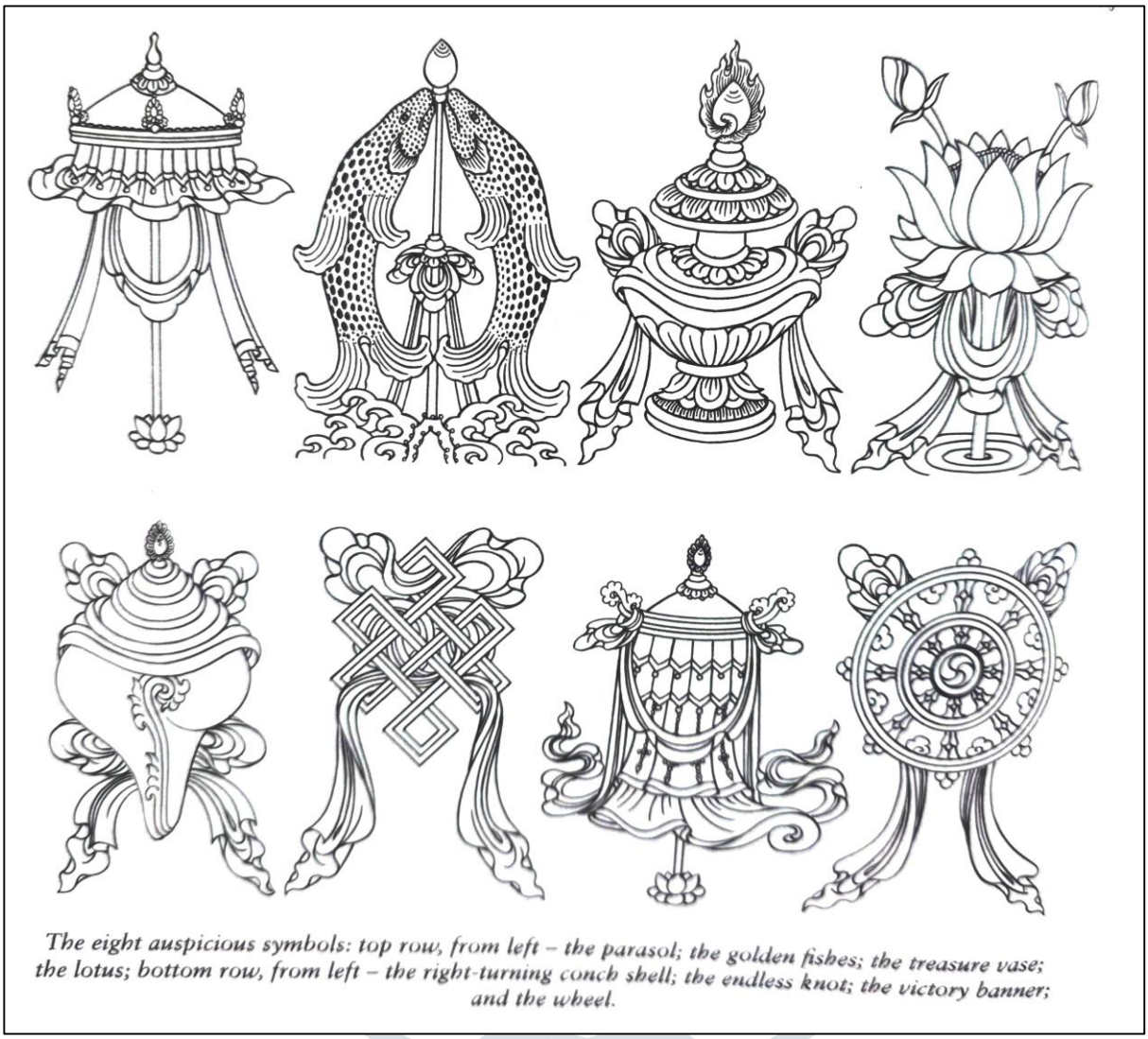
Overall the change reflected in the post-1975 edition are:

- The institutional transfer of sovereign legitimacy from hereditary Dharma-kingship to parliamentary democracy within the Indian Union.
- Shift from a sacred-monarchical temporal framework to a standardized, bureaucratic state timekeeping system and an instrument for secularism.
- Encodes Sikkim's political integration as the 22nd state of India.
- Operationalizes Indian constitutional secularism and democratic representation by granting public visibility to Sikkim's multi-ethnic and multi-faith communities.

DISCUSSION ON THE ASTAMANGALA

In Sanskrit, the eight auspicious symbols are known as the *Aṣṭamaṅgala*, and in Tibetan Buddhism, they are referred to as *Tashi Tagey*. Dagyab Rinpoche (1995, p. 17) writes that the symbols are "…one of the most popular symbol groupings among the Tibetans, and one of the oldest, being mentioned in the canonical texts, which means that it goes back at least to the Sanskrit or Pali texts of Indian

Buddhism". Thus representing the most well-known group of Buddhist iconography, these eight symbols are traditionally listed in a specific sequence: a white parasol, a pair of golden fishes, a treasure vase, a lotus, right-turning white conch shell, an endless knot, a victory banner, and a golden wheel (Beer, 2003). The eight auspicious Symbols are depicted in the Figure no.3.



The eight auspicious symbols: top row, from left – the parasol; the golden fishes; the treasure vase; the lotus; bottom row, from left – the right-turning conch shell; the endless knot; the victory banner; and the wheel.

Figure No. 3. The Astamangala (Eight Auspicious symbols / Tashi Tagey)
Source: From **The Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols** (p. 2), by R. Beer, 2003, Shambhala Publications. Copyright 1999 by Robert Beer.

As Beer (2003, p.1) notes, "In the Buddhist tradition, these eight symbols of good fortune represent the offerings presented by the great Vedic gods to Shakyamuni Buddha upon his attainment of enlightenment". Historically, these symbols were incorporated into Sikkim's almanac, signifying Buddhist culture and values alongside a Buddhism-centred state ethos. However, their post-1975 retention reframes these sacred motifs as publicly legible cultural heritage and civic welfare, effectively translating spiritual protection into an administrative promise of care, stability, and prosperity for citizens.

Table 2: The Eight Auspicious Symbols: Traditional Buddhist, Pre-1975, and Post-1975 Meanings in Sikkim.

Eight Symbols (*Tashi Tagey*)	**Traditional Buddhist Meaning**	**Pre-1975 Monarchical Context (1974 Almanac)**	**Post-1975 Democratic Framing**
Parasol (Dug)	Protection from sufferings and miseries of the world.	Symbolizes the Chogyal's royal protection over the kingdom and Dharma.	The state's constitutional duty to protect the rights and welfare of all citizens.

A pair of Golden Fishes(Sernya)	Fearlessness, fertility, and ability to swim without hindrance in samsaric world.	Represents abundance and harmony within the Himalayan kingdom.	Reflects the peaceful co-existence of diverse communities.
Treasure Vase (Bhumpa)	Abundance of wealth, longevity, and good health.	Signifies prosperity blessed by the monarchy and monastic institutions.	Aligns with socio-economic development and shared prosperity under statehood.
Lotus (Pema)	Purity of mind and one's deeds. Symbol of non-attachment.	Embodies the sacred purity of the Chogyal *(*Dharma King) lineage.	Represents ethical governance and cultural integrity.
White Conch (Dhungkar)	Freeing from ignorance to the path of noble deeds.	Echoes royal decrees and monastic announcements.	Mirrors the democratic voice of the people and public transparency of state notifications.
Endless Knot (Palbheu)	Interdependence of all phenomena, wisdom, and compassion.	Bounds the ruler, sangha, and subjects in a sacred feudal-monastic order.	Visually reinforces social interdependence across Sikkim's varied ethnic and linguistic groups.
Victorious Banner (Gyaltsen)	Triumph of wisdom over ignorance and Good over evil.	Celebrates the historical sovereignty and spiritual resilience of Sikkim.	Symbolizes collective civic progress and overcoming historical divisions.
Dharma Wheel (Choekyi khorlo)	The noble path, cosmic order, and continuous motion of law.	Directly links royal law to Buddhist cosmic authority.	Parallels constitutional rule of law and the turning wheel of the civic calendar.

Source: 1974 and 2025 Government of Sikkim Almanacs.

Each of the eight auspicious symbols possesses a distinct meaning in Buddhism, in pre-1975 context and an implied significance in the post-1975 era (Table 2 and Figure 2). As shown in the Figure no.1 and figure no. 2, the *Astamangala* was retained intact in the post-1975 official government almanac. Remaining untouched across 51 years (1974–2025), this visual frame demonstrates strong iconographic resilience. It shows how sacred indigenous symbols transitioned from markers of the monarchy into shared emblems of Sikkimese cultural heritage and auspiciousness and anchoring pre-1975 traditions within a modern, secular civic identity.

This coexistence of calendrical democratization and iconographic continuity shows how state symbols adapt during political transitions. As scholars of nationalism and institutional symbolism note that (Anderson, 1991; Hobsbawm & Ranger,1983) official state artifacts help build a shared "imagined community" by linking modern civic structures to familiar cultural markers. In Sikkim's case, however, the continued use of the *Astamangala* is less an artificial invention than a cultural anchor. It provides visual and symbolic stability across a fundamental constitutional break. Even as government calendars and politics modernized and became more democratic, these symbols reassured citizens of their historical roots. Ultimately, the post-1975 almanac shows that secular statehood and traditional sacred iconography are not mutually exclusive. Instead, a secular constitutional framework can accommodate and draw symbolic stability from enduring regional heritage.

Moreover an expanded holiday list signals pluralistic inclusion at the level of civic observance, the continued prominence of the Astamangala underscores the enduring centrality of Buddhist-derived visual heritage within Sikkim's public iconography.

CONCLUSION

The political transition of 1975 fundamentally altered Sikkim's institutional landscape, transforming a Buddhist monarchical kingdom into a democratic state within the Indian Union. By comparing primary government almanacs from 1974 and 2025 alongside secondary sources, this study examined how official state almanacs manage major political change while keeping cultural traditions alive.

Regarding structural transformation, the post-1975 almanac underwent a significant change. For instance the removal of Chogyal's picture from the centre of the almanac speaks volumes about the change of guard and its implications. The institutional role of the government almanac shifted from a royal-religious calendar to administrative instrument of Indian constitutional secularism. Rather than focusing on a single courtly tradition, the post-1975 almanac serves as a platform for democratic recognition. It grants public visibility to Sikkim's diverse linguistic, ethnic, and religious communities. Specifically, the calendar includes Nepali, Lepcha, Limbu/Kirat, Tamang, Gurung, Christian, and Islamic observances.

The 1974 edition contained a compact list of 20 holidays fixed around Buddhist religious festivals, the Chogyal's birthday, different communities' festivals and early Indian national days. The 2025 edition expanded to 42 public holidays alongside seven restricted holidays. This restructuring replaced monarchical markers with Indian national and state observances while dramatically widening community-specific representation.

Although the almanac's content shifted toward secular themes, the continuous use of the Astamangala over 51 years (1974–2025) highlights the lasting significance of these traditional symbols. These sacred symbols transitioned from markers of monarchical authority into shared emblems of Sikkimese cultural heritage and auspiciousness.

Ultimately, Sikkim's official almanac illustrates that democratic integration does not require erasing pre-existing cultural memory. Through the co-existence of a pluralistic holiday schedule and an enduring indigenous visual frame, the almanac bridges Sikkim's pre-1975 heritage with its post-1975 secular civic identity.

Scope for further research is vast in regard to studies on Astamangala in Sikkimese Government Almanac. One can examine how diverse Sikkimese communities interpret, relate to, and negotiate these symbols alongside official state emblems remains an important avenue for future study on cultural memory, secularism, and regional identity in the Eastern Himalayan state of Sikkim. Additionally future studies could undertake an in-depth longitudinal comparison of successive government almanacs across the intervening decades (1975–2025) to trace precisely how and when the holiday list expanded over time.

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