

Drass valley SHG Punare's Exposure Tour



Supported by: High Asia Habitat Fund

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31st August 2026

Background & Objective

The Himalayan Brown Bear Trust (HBBT) conducted a four day exposure tour visit to Leh district for Drass valley's all-women self-help group, Punare from 24th to 27th July, 2026. The Trust has been conducting dry needle felting workshops in Holiyal and Mushkow village of Drass valley since 2023 and has trained more than 70 women in dry needle felting. Over the last two years, there have been 10 women who have been consistently active in making felt toys. They have further trained women in their own villages to increase engagement within the group. Eight women from Punare were able to participate in the exposure tour.

The objective of the exposure tour for Punare was to connect the group with experienced SHGs in Ladakh that have been practicing dry needle felting and other crafts. By learning about the working systems and journeys of these groups, we hoped Punare would gain valuable insights to support the productive growth of their own group. We also organised felting workshops with the participating groups, creating an opportunity for them to exchange knowledge, techniques, and experiences. Additionally, the tour aimed to introduce the women to other women entrepreneurs, helping broaden their networks and inspire their professional aspirations.

24th July 2026

- Before departing for Leh, Punare connected with Rifat Amin Ma'am, a social entrepreneur from the Drass Valley. Rifat Ma'am is the co-founder of Zarin, a B2B enterprise, and the owner of La Cafe in Kargil. She shared valuable insights from her personal and professional journey, emphasising the importance of financial independence for women. She also invited Punare to sell their toys at her café, opening up a potential new market for the group.

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- Upon reaching Leh, Punare visited Tsering Dolma Ma'am's shop in the heart of Leh Market, where felt toys made by various Ladakhi SHGs are displayed for sale. The group observed the quality, pricing, and branding of the products, gaining a better understanding of how their own toys could be positioned in the market. The visit served as a useful prelude to their interaction with Tsering Ma'am and her SHG, Zamo, the following day.



Zamo Group: 25th July 2026

- Punare visited the Zamo group's workstation in Choglamsar, which is housed in a container structure provided by the government following floods in the village. The group was granted access to three previously abandoned container homes, which they now use as workspaces. As the women gather to felt two to three days a week, they have also created a small corner for preparing tea and meals, making the space both functional and conducive to collective work.
- Zamo shared their natural wool-dyeing techniques, using locally available materials such as onion skins, carrot leaves, and walnut shells. Tsering Ma'am also explained that she manages the bulk purchase of Changthang wool and arranges for it to be processed at a wool-cleaning machine in Leh. We learnt that this additional cleaning process gives the wool and the resulting products a cleaner, more refined finish.

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- Zamo was established in 2010 with 10 women and has since grown to approximately 40 members, ranging in age from 40 to 70 years. The women are organised into smaller groups, with each group specialising in a particular product, such as felted snow leopards, marmots and ibex, or knitted gloves.
 - The women sell their finished products in bulk to Tsering Ma'am twice a year. This arrangement provides them with a predictable source of income and enables them to build their savings.
 - The group also shared that they registered as a cooperative shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, Tsering Ma'am noted that, to date, they have not experienced any significant benefits from the registration.



Rumbak Group: 26th July 2026

- Punare travelled to the remote village of Rumbak for their next SHG interaction. The Rumbak SHG was established in 2014 and currently comprises nine women, along with a few male members.
- The group demonstrated felting techniques that differed significantly from those practised by Zamo, particularly in their approach to creating more defined and detailed forms in their toys. Punare had the opportunity to work alongside the

Rumbak group for nearly five hours, exchanging techniques and learning through hands-on practice.

- The Rumbak SHG was particularly impressed by the ibexes made by Punare and purchased some pieces from the group.
- Rumbak is characterised by its traditional Ladakhi architecture and has developed a distinctive community-managed homestay system. Guests are distributed equitably among the village's homestays, while the responsibility of leading the homestay group rotates annually among the members. The SHG's felt toys are also displayed and sold directly from their homes. The Punare girls were particularly intrigued by this model and were struck by the number of international visitors staying within traditional Ladakhi homes. The experience sparked their interest in the potential of homestays as a livelihood opportunity, while also highlighting the importance of preserving and sustaining the traditional Ladakhi way of life.



Saspochey Group: 27th July 2026

- From Rumbak, Punare travelled to Saspochey, a village known for its active and diverse network of SHGs engaged in a range of livelihood activities, including wool spinning, seabuckthorn juice production, LED making, knitting, baking, and felting.
- The Saspochey felting group comprises six women between the ages of 40 and 70. The members work together in a dedicated room that has been collectively funded

and established by the village, providing them with a shared space for their activities.

- The group shared that the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) has supported them by providing training in various crafts, helping them develop and diversify their skills. Their products are sold through their respective homestays as well as in Leh.
- The visit to Saspochey broadened Punare's understanding of the potential of SHGs and demonstrated how a single village can collectively engage in a diverse range of crafts and livelihood activities. Punare also noted that, despite its small membership, the felting group has maintained a consistent practice and established a reputation for producing high-quality felt toys.



Impact

The exposure tour had a significant impact on Punare, with the experience being particularly meaningful for some members who were visiting Leh for the first time. Through the exchange of knowledge and techniques, the women were able to improve the proportions and finishing of their bears, while also identifying ways to make their production process more efficient.



Bushira, a 17-year-old member of Punare with aspirations of becoming an entrepreneur, shared that the exposure tour gave her new ideas, perspectives, and connections that could help inform her future career path.

The group also recognised the social value of coming together to felt and has since incorporated collective felting into their routine. As Mushkow and Holiyal are approximately three kilometres apart, the women take turns visiting each other's villages to work together. These regular sessions have created a shared activity that the women look forward to each week, while also encouraging other women in the community to participate.

The impact of the exposure tour extended beyond the existing members of Punare. Approximately 15 women from the Drass Valley who had previously received felting training from the Trust expressed interest in joining Punare. Since then, they have resumed felting and have begun producing toys again, indicating a renewed interest in the craft and the potential for the group to expand its membership and collective production.

