Looking for Work: Punjabi Choices and Punjabi Options

After being in the United States for about a year, Rohanpreet Singh began driving taxis. That was in the year 1996, when he was 43. When I spoke to him in 2008–2009, he was still driving yellows in the New York metropolitan area. I detected some frustration in his tone when he discussed the reasons for choosing the occupation. Perhaps alluding to those like himself, he said that most people come to America without a definitive plan for success. It is particularly a problem because Punjabis, according to his wife, are not “professionals.” Driving taxis, therefore, offers a higher income and flexibility than the “odd jobs” into which he was initially incorporated, but clearly not one that Rohanpreet preferred. Like other “non-professionals,” he was compelled to adopt this line of work due to his lower level of education. He was embarrassed to reveal that he had not completed high school. Besides, he did not think that he could do any other type of work at his age that would allow him to meet his expenses. That the grueling nature of the work dissuaded the native born, especially whites, from driving taxis only left open this opportunity for those like Rohanpreet.

Consistent with Rohanpreet’s narrative, the informants believed that their lower educational qualifications, an indicator of their lower socioeconomic background, impeded
their job chances in America. Interestingly, they did not necessarily see their non-whiteness as an obstacle in the labor market. But they viewed whiteness as a source of privilege that enabled access to better jobs for those who were defined as such. For them, it was more about their foreign-born status that had an adverse impact on their access to better quality of work. In light of such constraints, the Punjabis were attracted to driving taxis—work they perceived to be the best of all options. And people like them were vulnerable enough due to their foreign-born status and lower social class, and thus accepted the work of driving taxis. In this way, the information obtained shows the continued impact of race and class in the lives of the Punjabi immigrants.

The Punjabi suggestion of race and class organization of American society is, in fact, not far-fetched. As whites moved up the socioeconomic ladder, they moved out of low-skilled work, like driving taxis. And economic restructuring brought along with advancements in capitalism deteriorated the conditions of work in the New York taxi industry—yet another factor that pushed not only whites out of the industry, but also the native-born in general. Vacancies in the New York taxi industry resulted from this kind of reorganization of American race and economic interests. While vacancies in the New York taxi industry were not created for the Punjabis per se, they were the kind of workers the industry desired. The Punjabis simply showed up in New York City at the same time those changes occurred. The confluence of all these factors shaped Punjabi incorporation into the New York taxi industry. This is how the informants’ decision to drive taxis is related to the societal workings of race and economic interests, structural variables that made the race and social class of the Punjabis important in their job choices.

In this chapter, I first discuss race followed by a discussion of social class of the Punjabis. As in previous chapters, I discuss race at the macro- and micro-sociological levels. In particular, I elaborate on the linkages between the Punjabi choice to drive taxis and changes in the racial composition of labor in the New York taxi industry. Through this discussion, I assess the extent to which the non-whiteness, or race, of