M.N. Srinivas: the quintessential Bangalorican

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BANGALORE: Eighty-three-year-old — but the fire still burns bright. Academic, intellectual, celebrated social anthropologist and yet so down-to-earth.

M.N. Srinivas called The Times of India office, Bangalore, a couple of weeks ago. “The Bangalore City Corporation is using granite to pave the sidewalks. This is a tragedy. They are quarrying all those wonderful rock formations on the outskirts, ruining the aesthetics of this city and causing great harm to the environment. Please write an article that will put pressure on the BCC to stop this vandalism.”

Three months earlier he was on the phone, “Why are they allowing these huge trucks and lorries to hurtle through residential areas? Are the police blind?”

Srinivas always poke fun at himself in the presence of younger people. “I’m becoming a relic in this hi-tech city,” he said. “All you fellas use computers, but I still write long-hand. It’s difficult for me to sit before a PC.”

He kept track of global news, environmental movements, the conspicuous consumption of urban India, the rise of communalism. But he never became cynical. “This country has an infinite capacity to reinvent itself.”

Mysore Narasimhachar Srinivas had made it his life work studying the country’s castes and sub-castes and their mind-boggling insidiousness, first as a student, then as a teacher. “We have been chasing caste instead of poverty for far too long. How I wish we could change that,” he had remarked.

There was about this good professor not just the warmth of a gentleman but the dignity of a guru, who had been a beacon of light to thousands of students of sociology in India and elsewhere.

And it’s his classic The Remembered Village that we will always treasure. “I had written about my experiences working in a village called Rampura near Mysore as a research student and was all set to get it printed. As a fellow at the Centre for Advanced Study in the Behavioural Sciences at Stanford, I had found the right atmosphere to articulate my findings. The Vietnam protest movement was on and some arsonists set fire to the build-

M.N. Srinivas believed in the intrinsic worth of India and hoped we will be better off in the near future.