I have lived in India for 17 years of my life in a moderately orthodox family and have gone to school in a moderately liberal environment. I then went to Grinnell College, an intensely liberal place. And now I am in Amsterdam; this strange mix of experiences has my cultural adjustment in a pertinent state of limbo. But, that being said, these are my reflections about cultural differences between India (more specifically, Mumbai) and Amsterdam...

I have successfully managed to live in Amsterdam for a month now (!). When I first got here, it seemed like any other white, western country and did not seem all that different. Over time small differences began to peek out, but now they have settled over me in an awkward but cozy manner.
One of the most striking ideological differences between Amsterdam and India is the open-mindedness of people here. On one hand, in India anything relating to sex is such a taboo that one can barely have an open conversation about it. For example, homosexuality was decriminalized just a few weeks ago, the drinking age limit in Mumbai is 25 (alcohol is banned in a lot of states), women are expected to dress in a certain way, and there are very enforced hierarchical structures in institutes with the expectation of the usage of professional language. On the other hand, Amsterdam has a much more relaxed environment when it comes to sex and drinking laws. It has an open LGBTQ community, does not have as many restrictions on self-expression, and I have definitely heard more than one of my professor’s curse. Because of this, even though Mumbai is and always will be my home, I somehow feel much more relaxed here. However, I might also be biased due to the fact that I do not know as many people here, so I feel less judged.
Other than that, there are basic differences in day-to-day life that I am still getting used to. First, there is the fact that Amsterdam is 1/3rd the size of Mumbai in a land 1/22th the size of Mumbai in population! Even though I know Amsterdam is a city, the relaxed life here, the lack of the concrete jungle with the closely packed skyscrapers, the lack of people bustling and hurrying past you, the missing buzz of people talking and the sparsely populated public transportations, is so different from what I am used to and love calling a city. In Mumbai, to get anywhere I had to drive for at least half an hour, but here everything is almost walking-distance. This is another thing I have had to get used to here - the walking. In India we have rickshaws, which are three-wheeled vehicles used in the same way as cabs are - except they are much, much cheaper. People use them even for distances that would take five minutes to walk. But here, everyone either bikes or walks, which is probably a good thing in terms of health, but something I am not used to at all, and my shoes have worn off much more than I had expected them to. And another thing that surprised me as far as the relaxed-way-of life goes is that Amsterdam has such an active nightlife, but barely any stores are open past 9 in the evening. However, something contradictory which I have noticed in my every-day-life is that while in India people dress decently, I think there is a very strong underlying theme of comfort and practicality. Yet here everyone is always extremely well dressed. This is nice because I am forced to wear something other than my sweat pants, but I am also not sure how long I can keep it up! Finally, as a vegetarian (and I understand that I have limited options because of this), I am still trying to figure out what Amsterdam’s (the Netherland’s) cuisine is!

Apart from these day-to-day differences, on a more personal level, living in a predominantly white city where for the first time in my life I do not understand the language (other than English) and my behavior attracts more attention, is something which has required more of an adjustment than I thought it would have.

But, despite all these minor cultural contrasts, the fact remains that people are the same everywhere; they feel the same passions, sadness, and love, and work and live under the same moon and sun, and I am overjoyed to be living here and to be able to call Amsterdam my home too.