

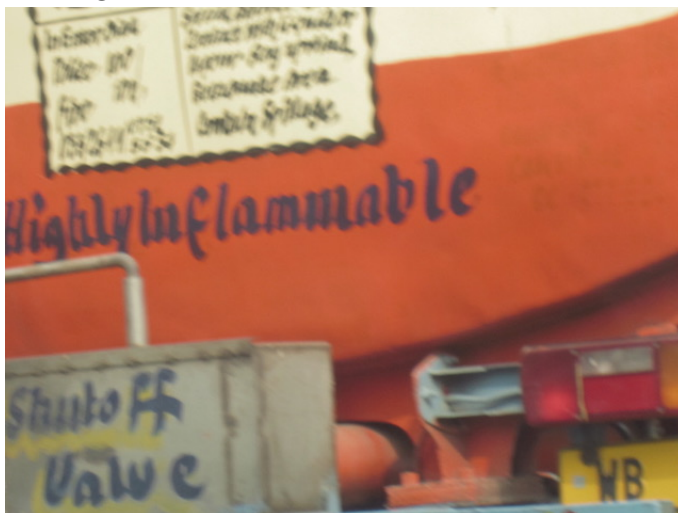


**IndianOil**  
The Energy Of India

## A CHRISTMAS REVERIE

To the casual eye – and on Indian roads you’d better not indulge in theoretical reflection unless you aspire to be a **saddhu** – the calligraphy on the tanker fleet of IndianOil, though sprawling all over, looks deceptively uniform. However, as traffic jams provide ample opportunity for in-depth comparative scrutiny, a recurring key message on these battered vehicles perpetually cruising the highways and byways of the subcontinent reveals subtle differences between the hands at work here. These two photographs, taken within seconds of each other on Christmas Eve on the Alipore Road, Kolkata, will illustrate the point.

*Photograph 1*



*Photograph 2*



But what **is** the point illustrated?

Is it that a rare slip of the artist's brush has gone unnoticed or been left uncorrected for one reason or another – being judged negligible, too embarrassing to own up to, or reparable only by flouting calligraphical standards?

Is it that the grasp on English spelling in the scriptoria of the tanker depots can be firmer or weaker?

A Portuguese substratum? Codeswitching? I have it on good authority (sitting on the backseat of our car) that **inflamável** is not among the numerous loans Bengali owes to Portuguese, but then the lettering on IndianOil tankers might of course be a job West Bengal is outsourcing to itinerant calligraphers hailing from Goa. (Like the Sisyphean white-and-blue makeover of kerbstones and railings along Kolkata's avenues is probably an everflowing source of income for plein-air painters enlisted from my own native Bavaria, surely unrivalled specialists in their national colours.)

My theory, however, is that the scribe whose orthography might appear to be defective is in fact a more accomplished morphologist than his double-m fellows. Rather than store away in the lexicon all words as they come, bulky or tiny, and upon request reproduce them from memory, as parrots do whose vocabulary training has been successful, he likes to decompose them and to experimentally re-assemble their parts. He may know no verb **to inflamm** and no noun **flamm**, and the meanings of negative **in-** and **flammable** will not add up satisfactorily either. But The Flamboyant Morphologist doesn't despair at the first hurdle. Who hasn't seen these tankers constantly go up **in flames** – and only small minds will nit-pick over **-able** being suffixed to something other than a verb. Perhaps the intended message is a double entendre about the drivers as well as the load: Valued road user, irascible lot that these pilots are, **inflamm** them at your own risk! Which even gives **-able** a good transitive verb to derive an adjective from.

Ishmael, put your foot down and get past that blasted tanker!

