In India, you don’t need a Google phone to have a Google Assistant



Enlarge / Google Assistant isn’t just for smartphones anymore—at least, not in India.

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India is an enormous developing market for international companies like Google—who list Hindi as the second most-used Google Assistant language, after English—but many of those potential Indian customers don’t have smartphones and may frequently be in areas with little or no data coverage. Today, Google announced a partnership with telco carrier Vodafone Idea that brings the Google Assistant to those users by way of a simple, toll-free dial-in service.

Indian users can now call 000-800-9191-000 and interact with

the Google Assistant entirely by voice in either English or Hindi, with other language support planned over time. Most of the standard “Hey Google” functionality is available—you might ask what actress played a particular movie role, who sings a popular song, or where to find a nearby store.

This version of the Assistant isn’t tied to any individual user’s Google account, so it can’t do things that require personal data access, such as creating a calendar event or calling a friend. Whether this is a bug or a feature is left as a thought exercise for the reader—Incognito Mode Google Assistant, anyone?

This new service follows on the heels of the Google Assistant for KaiOS, launched earlier this year, which brought access to the Google Assistant to Indians who had very low-end feature phones. Google believes that access to its Assistant is particularly important to users in emerging markets, who frequently have less screen real estate to navigate complex control systems and less experience with them as well. For many of these users, a voice-activated assistant could be a more natural and feature-full way to interact, rather than an unfamiliar and limiting metaphor.

> *… for the new users which are coming to this technology for the first time, voice is really the easiest and most natural way for them to use their phones. It’s removing a technology barrier for these users.*
> *Behshad Behzadi, Google senior engineering director*

More traditional, smartphone-based versions of the Assistant in India are capable of wider language support and can converse with their users in nine Indian languages. Google has made it possible for these users to configure their phone and their Assistant to use different languages—many users prefer the on-screen configuration language to be English while conversing with the Assistant in their native tongue. The Assistant can handle this decoupling directly, with users able to ask “Hey Google, speak to me in Punjabi” rather than

digging around in on-screen configs.

Google is also adding a new Interpreter mode to the Assistant, which will allow two people speaking different languages to converse in real time. The feature currently supports English and Hindi, with more languages to come, and should start rolling out over the next few months.

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