

# NDA 2026 vs CDS: Difference, Eligibility & Career Scope

Choosing between **NDA 2026** and **CDS** is one of the most common dilemmas for defence aspirants. Both exams are conducted by **UPSC** and lead to prestigious careers as **Commissioned Officers in the Indian Armed Forces**, but they differ significantly in **eligibility, age, training, lifestyle, and career path**.

This **SEO-optimised, comprehensive guide** explains **NDA 2026 vs CDS** in detail, covering **differences, eligibility criteria, exam pattern, training, salary, career scope, and FAQs**—to help you decide the **right entry for you**.

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## What Is NDA?

**National Defence Academy (NDA)** is an entry-level exam for candidates who want to join the Armed Forces **right after Class 12**.

- Conducted twice a year by UPSC
- Leads to training at **NDA, Khadakwasla**
- Entry into **Army, Navy & Air Force**

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## What Is CDS?

**Combined Defence Services (CDS)** is for **graduates** who want to become officers in the Armed Forces.

- Conducted twice a year by UPSC
- Training at **IMA, INA, AFA, OTA**
- Suitable for candidates who missed NDA

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## NDA 2026 vs CDS: Key Differences at a Glance

Feature	NDA 2026	CDS
Conducting Body	UPSC	UPSC
Entry Level	After Class 12	After Graduation
Age Range	16.5 – 19.5 years	19 – 25 years (varies)
Gender	Boys & Girls	Boys & Girls
Academies	NDA → IMA/INA/AFA	IMA/INA/AFA/OTA
Training Duration	~4.5 years	1–1.5 years
Lifestyle	School-like discipline	College-to-military transition

# Eligibility Criteria: NDA vs CDS (Detailed)

## 1. Educational Qualification

### NDA 2026

- **Army:** 10+2 (any stream)
- **Navy & Air Force:** 10+2 with Physics & Maths

### CDS

- **IMA & OTA:** Graduation (any discipline)
- **INA:** Engineering degree
- **AFA:** Engineering or Physics + Maths in 10+2

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## 2. Age Limit

Exam	Age Limit
NDA 2026	16.5 – 19.5 years
CDS	19 – 25 years (academy-wise)

☐ *NDA is the earliest entry into the Armed Forces.*

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## 3. Marital Status

- **NDA:** Only **unmarried** candidates
- **CDS:**
  - IMA/INA/AFA – Unmarried
  - OTA – Both unmarried & married (women allowed)

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## Exam Pattern: NDA vs CDS

### NDA Exam Pattern

- Mathematics – 300 marks
- GAT – 600 marks

- SSB Interview – 900 marks

## **CDS Exam Pattern**

- English – 100 marks
- GK – 100 marks
- Elementary Maths (IMA/INA/AFA) – 100 marks
- SSB Interview – 300 marks

☐☐ *NDA syllabus is broader due to school-level candidates.*

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## **Training Comparison: NDA vs CDS**

### **NDA Training**

- 3 years at NDA, Khadakwasla
- 1-1.5 years at respective academies
- Focus on academics, discipline & leadership from young age

### **CDS Training**

- Direct training at IMA/INA/AFA/OTA
- Shorter duration
- Faster commissioning

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## **Career Scope After NDA vs CDS**

### **After NDA**

- Early exposure to military life
- Better long-term leadership grooming
- Higher chances of commanding roles

### **After CDS**

- Faster entry into service
- Ideal for late deciders
- Same rank and salary at commissioning

☐ Both lead to the same officer ranks and promotions.

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## Salary & Rank: NDA vs CDS

- Starting Rank: **Lieutenant / Flying Officer / Sub-Lieutenant**
- Pay Level: **Level 10 (₹56,100 + allowances)**

✓ Salary and rank are **identical** in NDA and CDS.

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## Which Is Better: NDA or CDS?

### Choose NDA If:

- ✓ You are in Class 11/12
- ✓ You want early military exposure
- ✓ You are ready for long training

### Choose CDS If:

- ✓ You are a graduate
- ✓ You missed NDA age
- ✓ You want quicker commissioning

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## Common Myths About NDA & CDS

- ☐ CDS officers are senior to NDA officers
- ☐ NDA guarantees faster promotions
- ☐ CDS is easier than NDA

✓ *Reality: Performance and merit decide career growth.*

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## Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

### Q1. Is NDA better than CDS?

Neither is better; both are **different entry routes**.

### Q2. Can girls apply for both NDA and CDS?

Yes, girls are eligible for **both NDA and CDS**.

### **Q3. Do NDA and CDS officers get the same salary?**

Yes, salary and rank are the same.

### **Q4. Is CDS easier than NDA?**

Difficulty level differs, but competition is high in both.

### **Q5. Can I prepare for NDA and CDS together?**

Yes, with proper planning, preparation can overlap.

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## **Conclusion**

The choice between **NDA 2026 vs CDS** depends on **your age, educational stage, and career timing**—not on superiority. Both offer **honour, leadership, job security, and the pride of serving the nation** 🇮🇳.

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