NDA 2026 vs CDS: Difference, Eligibility & Career Scope

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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**.

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**

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

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)

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.

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

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

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

Both lead to the same officer ranks and promotions.

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.

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

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.*

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?

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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.

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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