Temples of Tamilnadu which are noted for their structural designs and iconographical excellence are a repository of both architectural and art forms that evolved over centuries. The earliest temples have been of Early Chola, Chera and Pandya periods which were mainly of brick evident in some of the structures that have been unearthed. It was the Pallavas who pioneered temple building activity as seen in the monolithic rathas, rock-cut halls as well as structural temples. The Cholas, prolific temple builders constructed some of the most majestic religious structures. This phase of temple building activity is called as the golden age of Dravidian architecture. A very remarkable contribution of the Cholas has been to metallurgy especially the bronze sculptures, as seen in the Siva Nataraja sculptures. The tradition of the Pallavas and Cholas was continued by the Pandyas, Vijayanagara and the Nayaykas. Epigraphical evidences speak immensely of temple building activity. Besides, are the songs of the Nayanmar and Alwar saints which throw much light on the temples and the presiding deities there in. In this land of temples, one of the most important sites has been Cuddalore.

From ancient times Cuddalore has been a sea port involving intense trading activities. Archaeological evidences point to active trade of the Romans. It is also popularly known as Koodalur meaning confluence as it is here that the rivers Pennaiyar, Kedilam and Paravanar meet. It was one of the most important centres during the times of Pallavas and Cholas. Cuddalore known for its many temples has been an important pilgrim centre, also boasts of many places of interest such as the Silver Beach at Devarampattinam, on the eastern side of Cuddalore, the very rich mangrove forest, popularly known as Thillaivanam, considered as the healthiest in the world at Pichavaram, the several islands, Satyagnana Sabha at Vadalur, Jamia Pallivasal and the Thoweeth Mosque at Cuddalore. Fort St. David, and most important Port Novo, bespeaks of significance the region gained with the coming of the Europeans. It is today one of the most important tourist sites known for heritage, environment, water sports
and other forms of tourism. The temples of the region belong to both saivite and vaishnavite faiths. Temples dedicated to Siva are the Nataraja Temple at Chidhambaram, Padaleeswarar temple at Thiruppathiripuliyur and Thiruvadhigai Veerattaneswarar temple at Panruti, Vriddhagiriswarar temple at Vriddhachalam, Thirunavalur and Thirumanikuzhi Siva temples in and around Cuddalore. The Vaishnavaite temples located in Cuddalore are the Bhuvaraha temple at Srimushnam and the Thiruvanthipuram Perumal temple at Thirupapuliyur. Saivatite saints Thirunavukkarasar and Sundharar were born in this district. Vallalar Ramalingar was born in Vadalur, a town in Cuddalore district and Avvaiyar, the great Tamil poetess gave in marriage Angavai and Sangavai, the daughters of the King Paari Vallal to Prince Devigan, the son of Malayan of Thirukoilur. The three temples under study, viz; Nataraja temple, Bhuvaraha temple and Padaleeswarar temple, are very ancient temples and are famous for their art, architecture and car festivals which are mega events of the temples. Besides these, a number of smaller and larger festivals are being conducted since ancient times almost every day and every week. These festivals are indeed a living tradition in the temples as in most of the larger temples of Tamilnadu. Some festivals are conducted by the temple itself and many others were patronized by the royalty, nobility as well as the rich communities and guilds in earlier times, though several sponsors have been coming forward in recent times. In promoting and fostering arts and culture the temples became hub of socio, economic and cultural activities.

The historical importance of the Thillai Nataraja temple at Chidambaram is that it is one of the Panchaboothasthalas representing the element Sky or Akasha. The others being Ekambranatha associated with Land, Arunachaleshwara with Fire, Jambulingeswara with Water and Srikalahasti with Air. Chidambaram is also called as Bhooloka Kailasam. Three idols, a Spatika Linga, a Rathnasabapathi statue and a Panchaloha Nataraja in Anandathandava bhangi are all located in the same sanctum of the temple. In this temple
alone the Moolavar seen in human form, unlike the linga (phallus) form, as in other Shiva temples, is brought out of the temple for the procession. Lord Vishnu, who is said to have witnessed the Cosmic Dance of Lord Siva at Chidhambaram, is also enshrined in the same temple. Architecturally, several mandapams and gopuras of the temple reflect the magnificence of architecture and artistry. It is one of the biggest temples in South India with a huge prahara. The well known Urdhvathandava dance in which Shiva defeated Kali, it is said, took place in the chariot shaped Nrithya Sabha. As per the sthala puranas, the Goddess who was enraged is said to have gone and settled on the outskirts of Chidambaram. At the spot a temple was erected and is dedicated to Devi, locally known as Thillai Kali. The renowned Nayanmar saints Thirugnana Sambandar, Appar, Manickavaskar, Sundarar on their visit are supposed to have entered the shrine from all the four cardinal directions signifying four pathways.

The Srimushnam Temple one of the eighteen Vaishnava shrines enshrines the captivating icon of Lord Bhuvarahaswami. Srimushnam is a very sacred place to Vaishnavites and it is one of the eight Svayam Vyakta (having come into existence by itself) shrines of Vaishnavas. The deity is formed by a saligrama stone. This image is in a victorious standing posture (akimbo, Nindra Thirukolam pose) with a zoomorphic form, a boar face and human body, indicating third avatharam of the deity. This form of boar faced moolavar is unique in Shrimushnam. His hands are folded on his hips and his weapons shanka and chakra are seen kept on his hips, not held in his hands. The Uthsavamurthi is a human faced Yagnavaraha and is taken out in procession with his consorts Sridevi and Bhudevi. Apart from the boar avatar, sculptures representing many other avatars are also carved. A special korai kizhangu prasadam is offered to the devotees. There is a Garudasthamba in front of the temple which is different and unique, not to be seen in other Vishnu temples. Just behind the Vishnu temple, facing the opposite direction, is a Siva Temple.
The Thiruppathirippuliyur temple having the presiding deity Lord Pataleeswarar also known as Thondrathunai Nadhar, 1300 years old is an ancient Saivite shrine. The Devi consecrated in the temple is Periyanayaki Amman. The sthalavriksha Pathiri tree, blossoms once in twelve years, and the flowers which are not fragrant are not used for the pooja. After a dispute with Lord Siva, Parvathi is said to have undertaken a penance in Thiruppathirippuliyur and married him here. Vyagrapathar attained his salvation here. This is indicated by the name Thiruppathirippuliyur, Pathiri, referred to the sthalavriksha and Puliyur, the tiger legged saint, who sat in penance at this place. All the four saivite saints, Appar, Sundharar, Manickavasagar and Thirugnanasambandar had sung in praise of the Lord in their hymns. A ten day grand festival is celebrated for Appar and one of the days, Appar is taken out in procession to a small village, Karaiyeriakuppam, where he is given a thirthavari and kept throughout the day. There is an empty shrine without any statue which is supposed to be the place where Parvathi took her penance.

The temples have always been an important part of the socio-religious life of the people in India. They were the seat of great communion where the rural and the urban, the high and low, could meet in an atmosphere of friendliness for a common purpose. They helped to bring together people from neighboring villages. In the Nrithyamandapas and Koothanpmbalams, the dancers of the temple, regularly conducted the dances in the evenings. Even now, Natyanjali programmes in Chidhambaram Natyasabha are popular and are conducted every year on a grand scale. Paintings as seen on the walls and ceiling of Sivagami temple speak advancement in the art of painting. The craftsmen and the sthapathies had, not only the knowledge of technique of car construction, but also decorating the same with sculptures. The temple cars, fully decorated with narrative and descriptive panels, depicting the themes from epics, mythology, sthala puranas, legends, and contemporary events. The temples engaged a large number of employees for the temple services and were paid in terms
of grains for their services. The priests of the temples and the Devadasis were highly
honoured and paid. A separate sect of the priests known as Deekshidhars conducted the rituals
at the temple, and their families, even today, continue to perform the rituals. The Devadasis,
who were very much a part of the temple were also put on the wage list. Their main duties
were to sing and dance in front of the deity at specified times daily and accompany the deity
during processions. Temples sprang up in Southern India on a large scale during the period
of agrarian expansion, through Devadhanam and Brahmadeyas. The lands donated to the gods
were called Devadhanam and the property of the god was called Devasvam. The lands that are
given to the Brahmans were called Brahmadeyam and property was called as Brahmasvam.
Even today, almost all temples have their own properties in the form of lands and jewels from
which they receive revenue for the temple expenses. Several The inscriptions pertaining to
devadhanam and brahmadeyam are found on the walls of the temples under study.

The Bhakti Movement was one of the radical socio-religious movements challenging the rigid social
divisions. A group of saint-poets, known as the Nayanmars and Alwars who launched a tirade against the rigid
socio-religious practices and irrational beliefs cutting across barriers of caste and creed. They travelled from
temple to temple, singing and dancing with their devotees and slowly it became a mass movement. The
Chidhambaram Nataraja temple and the deity were immortalized in Tamil poetry in the works
of Thevaram by these poet saints. Thirugnanasambanthar composed two songs in praise of the
temple, Appar eight songs in praise of Nataraja and Sundarar ten songs in praise of Nataraja.
Thirugnanasambanthar also went and sang in Thiruppathirippuliyur Temple. Manikkavasakar’s Thiruvasagam is placed near the idol of Shiva. Several verses of
Thiruvasagam after singing of which he attained his Mukti, at Thillai Nataraja's feet, got
engraved on the walls of the Chidhambaram temple. King Rajaraja Chola I, with help of his
minister Nambiyanandar Nambi, recovered the Thevaram scripts written on the palm leaves
from a chamber in the Thillai Natajar temple. After the recovery of Thevaram, Rajaraja I
arranged for the cleansing ritual of the palm leaves in the Natarajar temple. From then onwards commenced the practice of reciting the Thevaram hymns, which in course of time became a custom and came to be adopted in all Shiva temples which continue even today. In Shrimushnam and other Vishnu temples, Manickavasagar’s Thiruvasagam and Andal’s Thiruvembavai which used to be sung is to be seen even now.

Earliest references to chariots are traced to the Aryans, whose rathas were light wheeled and these in course of time got transformed. These gave rise to palanquins which got transformed into various forms of the chariots including litter. They are temporary and are built on the festival days and are dismantled the very next day after the festival. During the festival days, especially, except on the Rathothsavam day, on all other days, the palanquins are still used to parade the deities in procession, both during mornings and nights. After the invention of the wheels, the two wheeled and later, multiple wheeled chariots came into existence. The simply built kattaiither became modified into a simple Vairather. Vairathers have an elaborate plinth, consisting of aadhara, upapeeta, adhistana and natakasana (narasana), but they generally do not have reliefs. The modern Chithiraither which is a fully developed car differs from the Vairather in that they have multitudes of reliefs on all the tiers or thalas. All Chithirai thers irrespective of their shape and size were Sarvathobadhra, having four doorways and four porticos, facing all the cardinal directions, allowing devotees to have a better view of the god, from all thequarters. The shape of the cars also varies from four, six or eight sided (square, hexagonal and octagonal) and some in circular shape; they are called as Naagara (square shaped), Pattasra (rectangular), Aandhra (hexagonal), Dravida (octagonal), Vesara (circular) and Kalinga (oval). Most of the cars have been built with a square base and an octagonal plinth (Nagara - Dravidian) type. The Kumaratantra describes eight types of temple cars, based on number of wheels. Vijaya (three wheels), Kantha (four wheels), Srikara
(five wheels), Visalakka or Visala (six wheels), Nibadhra (seven wheels), Srivisala(eight wheels), Bhadra (nine wheels) and Badravisalakka (ten wheels).

The Chidhambaram temple has five cars, one each for Lord Nataraja, Goddess Sivagamasundhari, Lord Ganesha, Lord Muruga and Chandikeswara. Srimushanam and Thiruppathiripuliyuur have one car each. While the Moolavars, Nataraja and Sivagamasundhari, are taken out as the Uthsavamurthis in Chidhambaram, the moolavars of the other two temples are not taken out in the processions. Instead, different Uthsavamurthies are used in processions.

A special mention has to be made about the friezes on the cars. In ancient times, Shiva cars had predominantly the reliefs of Lord Siva and his manifestations, especially Bikshadana and Dhakshinamoorthy, and Goddess Uma and her manifestations. In Vishnu cars, the friezes of Lord Vishnu and his various avatars alone are sculptured. This is true in case of Chidhambaram and Srimushnam cars. But in Thiurppathirippuliyur Shiva car, which is a new one of modern years, almost all gods and goddesses like Vishnu, Brahma, Parvathi, Lakshmi and Saraswathi along with many minor deities are carved. It is quite interesting to note that reliefs of Lord Ganesha and Lord Muruga are carved in all the three cars. In Virinjipuram car, apart from Margabandheeswarar and Maragathavalli Thayar, the reliefs of all the eight ashtathikpalakas with their vahanas may be seen. In all the above said cars, the reliefs of erotic figures are scarcely seen, hidden as they are behind the wheels. But in Kanchipuram, Varadarajaperumal temple car, they are seen in multitudes. On the other hand, in Thiruvidaimaruthur car, a newly built one, there is not even a single erotic figure. The Sthalapurana sculptures of the temple are designed and engraved on the top thala of the car, especially on the front side. In Nataraja car, the scenes depicting Shiva as Bikshadana, Mohini and the rishis in the Dharukavanam, followed by Shiva’s Anandhathandava are beautifully depicted in a panel. In another panel, the story of Vyagrapather and Pathanjanjali witnessing
the cosmic dance of Shiva are beautifully portrayed. In Bhuvaraha temple car, scenes of the Boar Avathara of Lord Vishnu are exclusively carved out in the top (Adhisthana) panel. In Padaleeswarar temple car, scenes of Parvathi hiding the eyes of Shiva, Parvathi doing the penance in an arupa form and Shiva’s Anandhathandava are beautifully brought out. In the other thalas of the temple cars, stories related to puranic events such as Sivathandavam, Samudramathanam, Gopivasthrabaharana and Ramayana are engraved. These godly reliefs are depicted in the middle of the panels, while the figures of animals such as the horses, elephants and lions, and the mythical figures like yalis, makaras and gandharvas are fixed at the corners of the tiers. While dwarapalakas guard the cars in the Nataraja car and Padaleeswarar car, dwarapalakis guard the Amman car. In Chidhambaram cars have a large number of reliefs, when compared to other chariots. The reliefs in Chidhambarm ther are moderate in size and clearly cut out, while in Sivasami Amman ther, the reliefs are not finely chiseled. The reliefs in Shrimushnam car are fairly big and sharp and neat. The reliefs are beautifully adorned with too many costumes, ornaments and floral designs. Due to poor maintenance of the car, many of the panels are without reliefs and the panels in which new reliefs are fixed did not match with old ones. In Padaleeswarar car the reliefs are new, but are of inferior quality when compared to other cars.

The poojas are conducted daily (nithya poojas), six times a day. The daily poojas starts with Kaalasandhi, early in the morning, followed by Ushathkaala pooja, Uchikkaal pooja, Prodoshakala pooja, Sayaratchai pooja and ends with Arthajama pooja, late in the night. The annual poojas are many. Bramothsavam is celebtared for 10 – 14 days. Kumbabhishekam is conducted once in twelve years. Car festivals are mentioned in the Tamil epic Manimekalai. A festival called as Indhravizha is celebrated for Lord Indra. As soon as a new car was constructed, a rehearsal (Vellottam) procession, with the chief sthapathi, seated on the peeta, was conducted.
Bramothsavam festival is popular in South Indian Temples. It is a ten day festival. Aani Thirumanjanam and the Marghazhi Thiruvadhirai are conducted in Chidhambarm. It is said that Appar and Sundharar participated in the festival of Thiruvadhirai. A ten-day festival is also conducted to the Goddess Sivagasundhari in the Tamil month Aippasi (October-November). A special pooja, Tiruppudavai-idu-vizha or Ruthusnanotsava (a function conducted on attaining puberty) is famous which is conducted on the ninth day of the Bramothsavam. In Srimushnam, the Brahmothsavam is named as Chithirai Peruvizha. Vaikasi Peruvizha is conducted in Thiruppathirippuliyur. In all these festivals, the festival starts with Dwajarohana or flag hoisting. The deities are given holy (Thirumanjanam) daily within the temple, alnakara and aradhana are done and are taken out for procession. Except the Rathiotsava day, the deities are taken out in palanquins, both in the mornings and nights. These festivals are sponsored by the local people belonging to various castes. One of the ten days is allotted to a particular caste group such as mudaliars, chettiyyars etc., involving all castes of that place, making all the people to stand together and forget their caste discrimination. On the tenth day of Bramothsavam, deities are taken out in procession.

In Chidhambaram, the cars of panchamurthies are drawn out in the same order every year. First Vinayagar ratha starts followed by Murugar, Lord Natarajar, Goddess Sivakamasundhari and in the end Chadikeshwarar moves. In Chidhambarm and Madhurai, on the Rathiotsavam day, the ratha halts at a fisherman's cove. Lord Siva, being the son-in-law of the fishermen, receives offerings from them such as new clothes, garlands etc. Similarly, the Srimushnam car makes a halt at a place called Killai and receives offerings from a Muslim Dharga. Besides reading a few pages from their Thiru-kur to the Lord and camphor aradhana is also performed by the muslims to the Lord. These two events clearly indicate that there was no discrimination based on caste or creed. Infact many of these customs came into being due the faith of the people. Such inter-faith harmony especially during festive occasions is to be
found at Chidambaram and Shrimushnam. It has to be mentioned here that a Muslim flag is hoisted at the top of the Shrimushnam car even today.

It is clear that festivals are not a recent phenomenon. With availability of sources in the temples, the procedures of the festivals are greatly modified. The number of cars that temple has, the number of poojas per day, the number of festivals in a month or in a year, even the length and routes in which, the procession goes are all modified as per the sources the temple has. But in Chidhambarm and Srirangam temples, although minor changes may be discerned, many of the customs are conserved especially in the conduct of the festivals and the rath yatras.

The maintenance of the ther has varied from time to time. In ancient times, the reliefs were cleaned and polished with a mixture of curd, honey and butter which is a kind of preservative and used as a pesticide. It also gave a gloss to the friezes. As a result of such preservative processes, the reliefs of the cars were protected from ruination. Nowadays, the reliefs are air-washed by the fire engine squad, as in Thiruppathirippuliyur and are polished with Varnish. The Chidhambaram ther kept closed in a shed is opened only at the festival times. But, the Srimushnam car was stationed in an open area, exposed to sun and rain, in the middle of the market area due to which dust and grime have been damaging the reliefs besides also are damage caused by the miscreants. Some of the panels have become vacant in the car and in some new friezes are fixed which did not match with old ones. Only recently, the Srimushnam car is protected in a separate enclosure. The Virinjipuram car is totally devastated and the Government has refused permission for the rathothsavam. Hence, the deities are being paraded in the kattaithers since a few years. For the pulling of the ther, since ancient times ropes made of coconut fiber were used and now, iron chains have came into use.

In many of the temples, the ther is driven by generators which are also used to for electric lights. The use of the generators also helped to cut short the processional time. Despite several
changes in rituals, religious services and some of the traditions, the festivals continue to draw massive crowds. The spirit and fervor are quite visible, as it is said; it is a celebration of unity. Pilgrims, devotees, tourists, both domestic and international throng together, thus also facilitating a considerable economic activity.